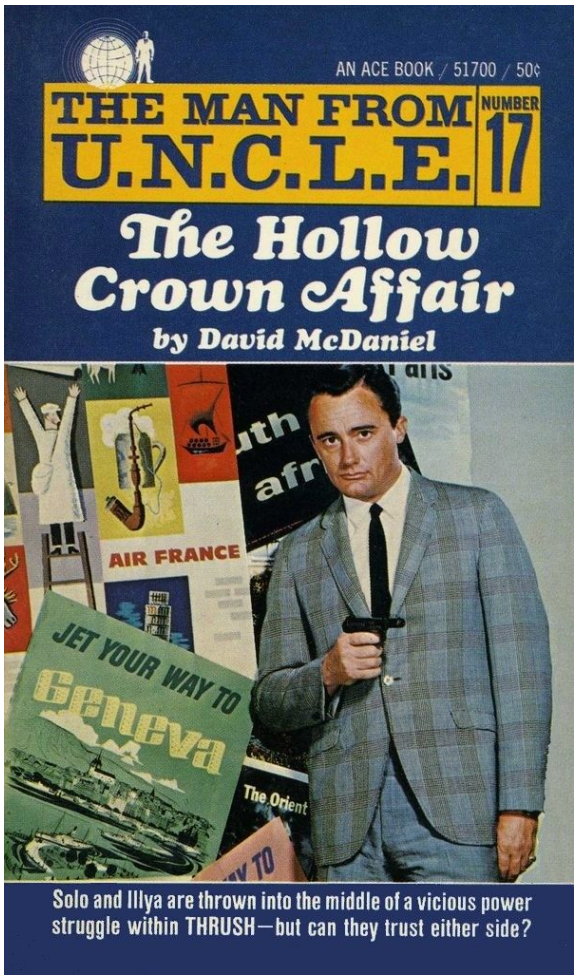
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NUMBER 17
The Hollow Crown Affair
by David McDaniel
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JET YOUR WAY TO
Geneva
Solo and Illya are thrown into the middle of a vicious power struggle within THRUSH—but can they trust either side?

The Hollow Crown Affair

by David McDaniel

DECEASED—LINE OF DUTY

UNCLE's dossier on Joseph King said their former Lab Chief had been killed during a field test of his new Particle Accelerator Rifle, a very deadly new weapon that backfired on him. There was no doubt about his death or the circumstances.

But could he somehow have escaped from the explosion and defected to THRUSH, taking the secrets of that weapon with him? Could he now be fighting treacherously for a position of power in THRUSH, using the P.A.R. against his rivals?

The head of THRUSH's San Francisco satrap claimed that was true, and he had voluntarily walked into UNCLE Headquarters to ask for help against King. Obviously UNCLE had to act—but Napoleon and Illya knew they would be facing sudden death from all sides.

"For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court..."
—Richard II, Act III Scene II 160-162

Del Floria looked up from his presser as the bell above his shop door tinkled and stared at the gentleman who entered. From the crown of his black homburg to the ferrule of his silver-topped cane stood six feet of aristocratic hauteur, piercing eyes above a well-kept beard, with an erect, almost military stance marred by the awkward angle of one leg.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Floria," said the total stranger. His voice was somewhat harsh, but carefully trained. He stumped clumsily down the four steps into the shop and crossed directly to the second fitting booth. At the curtain he paused and turned. "Well, push your lever, my good man! I wish to see Alexander Waverly."

Del stared at him. "I beg your pardon?" he said doubtfully. "If you're looking for the apartment house, that's a couple doors east at 320. Nobody named Waverly here."

"Don't be impertinent. Time is too short for me to go through that nonsense at the Masque Club. Where's your television camera?"

Del stammered as the man glanced around the wall molding and faced a barely-visible lens. "There was no opportunity for me to make an appointment, Waverly. If you are to take action at all, you must begin at once."

He took two quick steps towards Del and his can licked out to tap the steam lever twice. Then he turned back and through the curtain, twisted the coathook and stepped into the fluorescent blue light and steel walls of Inner Reception Station Three, just as a concealed speaker said, "Welcome to New York, Mr. Baldwin. Please wait where you are and I shall be down directly."

"Thank you, Mr. Waverly," said Ward Baldwin, and removed his hat.

In forty-five seconds the inner door slid open and Napoleon Solo entered as the sturdy form of Alexander Waverly emerged from an elevator just down the hall. Solo held the door open as his chief followed him in.

"My apologies for the lack of hospitality," Waverly said. "Unexpected visitors here are inevitably objects of suspicion."

"I quite understand. But my visit is not entirely social. If we could talk privately for fifteen minutes..."

"Miss Williamson," Waverly said to the concealed microphone, "set the conference back to three o'clock and prepare Room Twelve. Mr. Solo, stand by my office and handle operations; I'll signal if I want you."

A security badge was clipped to Baldwin's pocket, and as he prepared to follow Waverly, the UNCLE chief addressed him again. "I'm sorry, but under the circumstances I must ask that you surrender your stick."

Baldwin seemed momentarily to consider objecting, but didn't. "Handle it carefully," he said as he extended it to Napoleon. "It's quite valuable and would be difficult to replace." Then he followed Waverly through the inner door, hitching his left leg along painfully with what seemed to Solo like a little more effort than it should have required.

"Baldwin?" said the receptionist as the steel panel hissed closed. "Ward Baldwin? Isn't he something big in..."

"Thrush," said Solo. "Yes. He's the San Francisco satrap."

"I wonder what the Old Man knows that makes him willing to be locked in a room with him. And what would bring him in here in the first place, alone and unarmed?"

"Mr. Waverly knows Baldwin," said Solo. "Saved his life a number of years ago. And whatever he's doing here, I'll lay five to two it'll mean trouble for somebody."

"Us?"

"Mmmmm.... Maybe not, the way he walked in so abruptly. Maybe," said Napoleon in an instant of unwitting prophecy, "for Thrush." He started for the door himself, then paused. "At least we can hope."

* * *

The second fluorescent tube to the right of the door was flickering, almost imperceptibly, once every ten seconds. Alexander Waverly observed this from the corner of his eye and knew that the half-hidden cameras were live and the videotape was rolling. He faced Ward Baldwin across a comfortably low table and steepled his fingers.

Without preamble, Baldwin began. "Do you recall the name of one Joseph King?"

Waverly nodded. "Deceased about three years ago. A great loss to our research staff."

"Your loss was our gain. King was developing a new concept in small arms—his knowledge was supposed to have perished with him in a

thorough and messy manner in January of 1965 when a test misfired. King, in fact staged the accident himself and brought his genius to Thrush."

Against his will, Waverly's eyebrows crept towards his hairline and his forehead corrugated. He didn't voice a comment, but waited for Baldwin to continue.

"He has done well, and is already one of the highest-rated members of the Hierarchy. We make it a point to reward talent quickly and adequately. He is an able young man, and has attracted attention in the upper-most levels. I presume you would like to see him apprehended?"

Waverly's eyebrows descended to half-mast. "You hardly would have undergone the rigors of a trip across the country to sell out one man, even a turncoat. Obviously King has become a threat to you. Competition?"

"More than competition. Two months ago a member of the Council died of pneumonia following a heart transplant, and his seat is to be filled by vote of the survivors. By seniority, I expect to be chosen. But this upstart King is leading a vocal splinter group of terrifying young men who want him in that seat, and it seems I have been chosen as their primary target for vilification, libel, blackmail and assassination. I would prefer not to go deeply into the events which preceded my recent reluctant decision to close my home, disperse my household, and go to ground."

"I see. And what do you intend to do?"

"He has disrupted my existence, Waverly. I intend to disrupt his. I expect to win, for I am a good deal more resourceful than he."

"Calling us down on him comes under the heading of fighting dirty. Why should we spend our efforts helping you in your intraparochial feud?"

"You would have no reason at all to help me," Baldwin said blandly, "and I would hardly ask it of you. But among the slanders that have been spread about me is one to the effect that I have defected to the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, and I believe the term 'fink' may even have been used."

"My sympathy," Waverly said dryly.

"I was observed to enter your building ten minutes ago. Do you not think this may cause a few emotionally unstable individuals to leap to unwarranted conclusions?"

"In other words, you have set us up for an overt attack."

Baldwin shrugged, awkwardly humping his right shoulder a moment, and his eyes glittered. "I certainly hope it will not come to that directly, since I am still here. I have personal knowledge of UNCLE's strength and faith in your ability to withstand attack. But you must realize that King will not stop with a single attack—he will continue to press you until you

destroy him. Once the half-truce that has preserved your known operations is broken it will not be easily mended. He is not only a traitor to UNCLE—he is a traitor to Thrush by his methods and his deeds. His goal no doubt is exclusive personal control of Thrush, which I think you will agree would be bad news all round. So you see I am hardly to be held responsible for the situation. In fact, I have placed myself in great personal danger to warn you, and ask nothing at all of you in return."

Waverly regarded him for several seconds and the corners of his eyes crinkled microscopically. "While not wishing to demean what you have done for us already, it would be appreciated if you could give us a little more data on King—his current activities, his location..."

"Yes," Baldwin said musingly, "I wish I could help you more. But of course as his enemy I would hardly be in a position to know his secrets." He opened his coat and withdrew a long envelope. "However, even in my current precarious position, I am not without my resources. Here is a summary of what I have been able to discover about his character, his connections and his concerns. If anything else comes to my ears, I shall contact you."

He rose. "I can be of no further use to you, and the longer I remain the more suspicious the watchers will become."

Waverly followed him to his feet. "Allow me to see you to the door."

* * *

Illya was lounging against the desk in Inner Reception Station Three when Mr. Waverly preceded Baldwin through the door. The receptionist handed him a blue message flimsy; he glanced at it and turned to Baldwin.

"I'll just be another minute—please wait." He stepped back through the door before it slid closed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Baldwin," Illya said. "I take it nothing pleasant has brought you three thousand miles from home."

"Mr. Kuryakin. A pleasure to see you again. No, I fear I bring ill-tidings." He smiled, a brief grimace. "You will be briefed on the situation shortly, I'm sure."

"I trust your wife is well."

"Well, but unhappily not with me. My household has, in fact, been rent asunder."

"And Robin?"

"My nurse is presently on board Project Hope. And Bruno has taken the Royce to England for a complete overhaul; his own training is being refreshed at the same time. How are you and Mr. Solo?"

"Much as usual," Illya said. "Napoleon has taken off a few pounds and looks the better for it. Mr. Waverly was given a six-week vacation last fall and is in the bloom of health. There is little to gossip about."

"Yes, I heard about the vacation—I was given to understand it was during that period Mr. Solo shed his excess weight."

Illya nodded noncommitally. "I hope our New York weather isn't troubling you. July here must be quite different from San Francisco."

The door hissed open and Mr. Waverly entered, a cane in his hand and an apologetic expression on his face. "Please accept my most profound regrets," he said. "My lab crew informs me that your stick had the great misfortune to explode while we were investigating it and has been totally destroyed. By the best of fortune, however, we have this"—he extended the staghorn and ebony cane he carried—"which I believe you will find adequate. Its length, weight and balance are precisely to your specifications in the files of Brigg, your London stick-maker."

Baldwin accepted it, examined it carefully, swung it, shifted it lightly in his hands, and raised it to study a one-inch silver band which circled the shaft just at the neck. Engraved in the front was the Thrush emblem, a stylized bird in fighting posture. Baldwin turned the shaft around and inspected the initials and date on the inside—*A.W. to W.B. 1968*.

"Quite adequate. My thanks to you, sir." He unclipped his badge and handed it back to the receptionist, and tipped his hat to the room as he left. He also tipped it to a bemused Del Floria as he passed through the shop and to an utterly undistinguished hotdog vendor outside who stared after him a moment and then wheeled his cart rapidly towards a pay telephone.

Section I: "And Tell Sad Stories Of The Death Of Kings"

Chapter 1: "Deceased—Line Of Duty."
Chapter 2: "My Teeth Itch."
Chapter 3: "Where Would You Go If You Were Homesick For 1890?"
Chapter 4: "Sugar Maple And Pine."

Section II: "Tradition, Form And Ceremonious Duty"

Chapter 5: "Why Mr. Solo! What A Surprise!"
Chapter 6: "*Attenta! Pericolo!*"
Chapter 7: "Good Is Better Than Evil Because It's Nicer."
Chapter 8: "White Clover And Monkshood."

Section III: "Let's Choose Executors..."

Chapter 9: "What's A Bozo Bill?"
Chapter 10: "Watch Out For That Tree!"
Chapter 11: "I'm Glad They're On *Our* Side!"
Chapter 12: "Nineteen Sweetpeas And One White Rose."

Section IV: "And With A Little Pin..."

Chapter 13: "It Seemed Like Such A Quiet Little Town."
Chapter 14: "It Was A Long Way To Go For A Pinhole."
Chapter 15: "I Think He Was Scrooched."
Chapter 16: "*You Have But Mistook Me...*"

Section I: "And Tell Sad Stories Of The Death Of Kings."

Chapter 1: "Deceased—Line Of Duty"

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were draped in casual attitudes about the office as Alexander Waverly re-entered. He had followed Ward Baldwin's uneventful exit by closed circuit televisoon from the communications room, and had checked to see that the tiny solid-state broadcasting module imbedded in the presentation stick had sent its first powerful signal. It should continue to transmit its quarter-second carrier every half-hour for the next six months, and it would be very handy to know where Baldwin would be for that long.

"At your leisure, Mr. Solo, I should like to see the personal dossier I hear you have been compiling on Ward Baldwin."

The door hissed quietly closed behind him as he crossed to the bearing-mounted round table that dominated the large room. Napoleon Solo gave it a lazy turn, carrying a slim manila folder around to meet him as he approached. There was a red tab on the corner with no other markings.

"I took the liberty of bringing it with me. I don't have much of any real value, I'm afraid, but there are a few items towards the back you might not have seen."

Waverly sank into a black leather chair and opened the folder before him, glancing at the top sheet and sorting down through perhaps a bare score of pages, stopping to scan one from time to time.

Illya rose from the couch and sauntered towards the table. "Napoleon has been rather cagey with that. If I'm going to be involved in something with Baldwin again, I'd like to know a little more about him."

Solo suppressed a grin. "When I said that last year, you laughed."

Illya shrugged. "Nobody's perfect. May I?"

"The top sheet is a fax from the 1964 edition of *Who's Who in the Physical Sciences*, and it took a fair amount of finding all by itself. The blank spaces are sketched in with the rest of the folder," Napoleon said, and Waverly nodded.

"Have a seat, Mr. Kuryakin, and read this."

Illya accepted the slick fax page and studied it as he lowered his hundred and fifty pounds into a convenient chair.

BALDWIN, WARD FRASER: b. January 17, 1895, San Francisco, Calif. Son of Fraser Elliot and Vera Ward (Russell). Educ. Lowell H.S., 1910; B.S. Univ. of Calif., 1914 (Feb.); Rhodes Scholar, 1914;...

Illya subtracted, and canted his eyebrows as he looked up. "A Rhodes scholar at nineteen. Impressive."

M.S. Oxon. (Lincoln Coll.) 1918; D.Sc. Trinity College (Dublin Univ.), Hon, 1935, Acad. 1936.

"And twice a Doctor of Science," said Napoleon. "In Chemistry, by the way."

Mil. Serv.: Inns of Court Volunteers 1914-15; seconded to Chem. Warf. Dept., R.A.O. Depot Woolwich, 1916; Disch. (Brev. Maj.), 1919. Instructor in Chemistry, Trinity College, Dublin, 1920-21. Research Consultant...

Waverly cleared his throat. "Baldwin left Trinity involuntarily in 1921 when he was deported for his activities with the Irish Republican Army, which would probably make an interesting chapter in their own right. Both his American and his British Military passports were endorsed against entry into Ulster. In fact, he did not return to Ireland until 1935 to receive that honorary D.Sc.; once there he applied for residency and academically validated the degree in one year."

Illya nodded and glanced down the long list of firms which had availed themselves of Baldwin's services. Mr. Waverly's dry voice sped his eye past the list, saying, "Very few American or European chemical firms are *not* listed here. Baldwin's knowledge certainly is of recognized commercial value."

"Among my collection of trivia," Napoleon added, "you may also find that in the I.R.A. his code name was Asmodeus."

Illya paused, then smiled. "The limping devil. Appropriate." He returned to the brief biographical note.

Fellow Royal Chemical Society, Fellow American Society of Chemical Engineers, Member President's Council on Chemical Pollutants. Civilian Advisor, U.S. Army Chemical Warfare Dept. 1940-45. Author: 'The Future of Chemical Warfare' (1918); 'Comparative Morphogenetic Effects of Multivariable Halide Receptivity' (Doc. Th.) (1936);...

"I know what 'comparative' means, at least," Napoleon said wryly.

"I know what all of it means," said Illya. "I wish I didn't."

'Internal Combustion or Urban Habitability: A Choice (1960); others. Holder of 157 current Royalty Patents, U.S., Brit. and Intl. Married Irene Sarah Wrayne Sept. 1943. No offspring. Clubs: University (San Francisco), Commonwealth, Bohemian. Residence: Alamo Square, San Francisco.

Illya finished and raised his eyes from the paper. "I don't think Thrush is supporting him at all. I wouldn't be surprised to find him tithing to them and supporting all his own operations as well. What did he do in the I.R.A.?"

"Practical research in explosives, I believe," said Waverly. "The latter part of his military career took him under cover for the first time, and he seems to have developed a taste for it."

"Nice to see a man happy in his work," said Napoleon. "He joined Thrush about 1921, then, almost as soon as he came to this country. Whether his contacts in the Irish Rifleman's Association placed him or whether he wandered into it on his won I haven't really established; they may just have felt themselves drawn together. There's a page or two on operations we can definitely link with him—bits and pieces here and there about the world. He took over complete command of Thrush operations in San Francisco in 1954."

Illya said, "Hm. I'd gotten the impression he'd been running things there since just after the Earthquake."

"Well, he was born there long enough ago to remember it."

A buzzer sounded softly at Waverly's desk and a light flashed. Napoleon rose to fetch the bundle which had just arrived, and placed it before his chief. "It took them long enough to retrieve King's information packet from the dead files—that request went in over eight minutes ago. Here's all King left behind him when he changed sides."

"You accept Baldwin's story, then?"

Napoleon shrugged. "Politically or metaphysically, he changed sides. Here's the identification pairs of the corpse clipped in..." He studied the sheets side by side for a moment, and nodded. "They matched three years ago—they still match. No reason to think it could have been a ringer. Dental chart, retinal pattern, fingerprints, as much of the Bertillion code as was left to measure.... Anyway, here's his top sheet." He read aloud.

KING, JOSEPH: born 27 May 1929, Vienna, Austria-Hungary. Family name Koenig, anglicized when emigrated in 1935. Education: Stuyvesant H.S., 1947; B.S. Mass. Inst. Tech., 1950; M.S. 1952. Employed by UNCLE as Lab Tech 1952, Research Asst. 1952 in Electronics, Chem. Engineering, Nuclear Sections; Subhead Physics 1954; Physics Chief 1957; Lab Chief 1961. Deceased—Line of Duty, 12 January 1965.

"He took over as Lab Chief just about the time you got here, Illya, and you worked with him on and off as I recall. How would you describe him? Not physically—mentally. Compare him to Mr. Simpson, for instance, in the same job."

"Nothing at all alike," said Illya slowly. "King was dedicated, dogged, a methodical worker; he knew practically everything and didn't care about any of it. Simpson is an inspired tinkerer, is aware of *everything* and fascinated by all of it."

Waverly nodded. "I've often felt instinct should be allowed to play a larger role in both hiring and advancement. Still, King did some fine work

for us. He developed the modulation system for your communicators in 1953, and their powerpacks are derived from his original work in 1960."

"And then there was the PAR," Illya said. "We never did anything with that after it cooked him."

"That was the Scrooch Gun—the thing that blew things apart, wasn't it," said Napoleon untechnically.

"Essentially, yes," said Illya. "The Particle Accelerator Rifle used a series of charged coils to accelerate a mass two or three mil in diameter to a small but significant fraction of the speed of light. Because of the muzzle velocity the effect was about equal to an anti-tank shell at any range you cared to try and the trajectory was the line of sight for all practical purposes. King's only problems were the power supply and reducing the control circuitry to practical dimensions."

"And a tendency to backfire."

"Well, there was that. But a specific amount of energy takes a definite amount of shielding that could not be miniaturized without violating some very basic laws of physics. Apparently a stray radio frequency set off a backlash which developed positive feedback in a few dozen cycles and boiled his blood and fused the power coils solid before a safety cutoff could function."

Napoleon made a face.

"Well, you were there. It was at Site Delta, during his third run of field tests."

"I was there," Solo admitted reluctantly. "I'd just put it out of my mind. But since you'd brought it back, I've started wondering. All three of us were watching the whole thing on television monitors. How in the name of John Dickson Carr could King have gotten out of there?"

"He has a point, sir," said Illya. "Not only was the firing area under constant observation throughout the time, but we were there with the first investigating party no more than three minutes later, and he was still warm. Though under the circumstances..." He paused, and thought better of continuing.

"That was the subject of some conjecture on my part," said Waverly, "and I have reserved judgment during the search for evidence. The identification pairs are perfect—much of his face had been sloughed but his eyes were undamaged, as were the fingerprints of his left hand. And the identification is more than positive; it is perfect."

"How much of the Bertillion was checked?"

"Nearly everything but the face and ears. It didn't check out one hundred percent, but ninety-four is passing when the measurements are four

years old."

"Uh-huh." Napoleon nodded. "I think I'd like to take a look at that test again. We made a film off the videotape, didn't we?"

Waverly looked at Illya, who shook his head. "Frankly, sir, I haven't the least idea. The project was dropped after the accident, so there was no reason to save much pertaining to it. King never kept more than the most skeletal notes on paper and carried all the essentials in his head. When that got scrambled, there was no way of going into what he might have done wrong."

"It might still be worth checking. Since we computerized Section Four they save everything but string. I'll put a tracer on it and see what they find."

He took the gray handset from under the edge of the table and tapped a code number on the keys, then spoke in a clear, precise tone, spacing his words carefully. "Search—Particle, Accelerator, Rifle—cross-index King, Joseph. January, 1965." He raised his glance to Napoleon and Illya, shielded the mouthpiece and explained, "Records Retention is experimenting with a voice-programmed retrieval system. Sometimes it works."

He dropped his eyes and raised his voice. "Film," he said, and looked up again. "There is only one entry."

"We'll have to go in there," murmured Solo, and shrugged at Illya's puzzled glance while Waverly addressed the voice-programmed retrieval system as he would a retarded child. "Film. Of final test on P, A, R." He listened a moment and nodded. "Very good. Delivery."

A few seconds later he said, "Waverly here. Your automated filing cabinet has a film clip which I would like sent to my office. Thank you."

He replaced the handset and said, "Something which may or may not fit any of the categories I requested is on its way up. A possibility has just come to mind..."

"A theory?"

"It is a capital mistake to theorize with insufficient data," Waverly quoted. "The evidence pending should, however, prove sufficient."

"And if it proves he could not have gotten out alive?"

Waverly cleared his throat and reached for his pipe. "In that case, Mr. Kuryakin, we reserve judgment. King was—or is—a remarkably clever man, and I do not flatter myself there is no possible trick I could fail to see through."

An alarm bell shattered the momentary silence of the office, and the three looked at each other with wild surmise until Napoleon said, "It's an

alarm bell."

By that time Waverly had switched the television monitor to the corridor where the signal had originated. An agent was doubled over in the middle of the hall, near a manual alarm box; as they watched he fell to the floor and tried to crawl towards an open door.

"He's been poisoned," Illya said.

Before the last word left his lips three more alarms sounded, followed in moments by a clamor of others. The telescreen flashed from one hall to another, to women and men stumbling dizzily, clutching at doorhandles, staggering and falling, gasping with pain.

"It's in the air!"

Neck muscles tensed and diaphragms contracted even as their minds realized the symptoms would have already manifested themselves and ordered breathing resumed—though carefully at first.

"No it's not," said Napoleon. "Look. Nobody in the offices is affected." And indeed figures were visible standing just inside open doorways, though some held their heads and leaned heavily or sat down.

"Nobody?" said Illya. "I don't know about you, but my head suddenly feels stuffed up—and I had my annual cold in March."

Napoleon registered sudden concern. "It's my stomach," he said, matter-of-factly. "No, my chest. But it's not getting any worse."

"It may," said Illya. "At any moment."

Chapter 2: "My Teeth Itch"

Napoleon was already on his feet and heading for the door. It zipped open before him, but he paused before venturing past the portal. Then, with Illya just behind him, he stepped cautiously into the deserted hall, filled with the clangor of the alarms. Waverly was at his desk, communication circuits abuzz with questions and generally negative answers.

"It's not radiation anywhere in the electromagnetic spectrum as far as we can tell," was one hedging answer. "At least nothing we can detect."

"The air is still testing pure," came another answer, "at least as pure as it ever does considering where we get it."

"Even if there was somebody invisible running up and down the halls knocking people out, we'd detect him by mass, by body heat, by smell..." said a disconcerted security officer. "There's nobody there—I guarantee that personally!"

As Napoleon stuck his neck out a wave of nausea swept over him. He clenched his teeth, fixed his eyes on a closed door twenty feet away, and put as much effort as he could summon into a dash for it. The panel zipped open a fraction of a second slow and his right shoulder banged painfully into it as he reeled into the conference room and collapsed into a chair, gasping. Illya followed a second later, twisting his body sideways to miss the returning door and letting it close behind him.

"The headache's worse," said Napoleon, catching his breath.

"My teeth itch," said Illya critically. "It's not a gas, it's not radiation...wait a minute. It's not *electromagnetic* radiation, but look!" He pointed at the inner side of the metal door panel, where cracks were beginning to appear in the painted surface. As they stared, a piece of paint about the size and shape of a postage stamp broke free and fluttered to the floor. Other areas showed signs of letting go their bond to the metal and joining it.

"It's not an earthquake," said Napoleon doubtfully, "but it has many of the same symptoms. What do you think of infrasonics?"

"Personally I dislike them. Intellectually, there's something in what you say. It's not like that thirteen-cycle 'fear' tone you ran across in Rumania, though."

"No, this one is almost audible. I'll bet it's tuned to the width of the corridors here!—they're all the same width and mostly bare-walled. They'd make perfect whaddyacallem."

"Resonant cavities," said Illya. "That would also create a standing wave in the halls." He looked around the room distractedly. "Let's see if there is

one."

His eye lit on an ashtray, heaped with the fallout of the morning's briefing. Unsteadily he stood up, gripped the dish, and wobbled towards the door, which obediently zipped open before him and stuck halfway. Illya braced himself against the doorframe and pitched the handful of gray powder into the empty hallway. The stuff separated into a cloud of smoke and began to settle out towards the floor. As it settled it drew into two vertical bands of light and gray, dividing the hall into ghostly thirds.

Illya nodded. "There you are. It's—oh—sixteen or seventeen cycles per second, and I'd hate to guess the amplitude." He coughed and gripped the doorframe tighter as he turned back into the room. "Feel up to a sprint?"

Napoleon rose painfully to his feet, his joints complaining incoherently at the demand. "Just point me and say *go*. The elevator?"

"The elevator. I think I'll know what to look for out in the street, and Del has enough front-line defenses we should be able to handle it. Tell Mr. Waverly what it is, and tell him to stay in his office. It's big enough and well enough damped, he'll be safe enough to coordinate things."

"Check." Napoleon keyed his pocket transceiver and heard a keen shrilling. "Forget it. They're transmitting a jamming frequency now."

"Okay. Let's go."

They charged out the door, aiming bravely for the elevator seventy feet down the hall. Neither of them fell down more than once, but they took two fifteen-second rest stops in open offices. The smaller size of the elevator car lessened the resonant effect, though the main wave was still there.

Halfway up Napoleon had a thought. "Illya," he said, "what if the unit is underground—in a subway branch tunnel, or the dock area?"

Illya considered, breathing hard, and then said, "Three to one they're upstairs. Not worth splitting up to cover. A truck is easier to move in and out, and Thrush's key word is mobility. I just hope it's out here on Fifty-Fourth, and not all the way around the block. I don't think I could make it."

The door slid open and they stepped into Inner Reception Station Three. The clerk was standing, gun in hand, but her head was down and her arm hung limply at her side. She leaned heavily on the desk.

Napoleon grabbed her as they went by, took the gun from her and pushed her carefully into a chair, where she slumped and gasped. The steel door swung wide and they went through the cloth curtain into the back of Del Floria's. The door was closed but the blinds were up, and Del stood behind an armored partition at the back, watching the shop and the street outside through a one-way mirror with a small control panel at his elbow. He looked up, startled, as they entered.

"You tell me," he said. "All I get from downstairs is questions."

"We're checking out Big Bertha," said Napoleon, "and we may have the answer to all our troubles. Tell Mr. Waverly it's a seventeen-cycle infrasonic tuned to the corridors, and get a full-power defense squad up here on the double. If they duck into offices every thirty feet and breathe deeply, most of them can make it. Get it?"

"Got it."

"Good," said Illya, removing a nasty-looking piece of ordnance from a place of concealment and busily engaging in fitting different parts of it into place. "Don't pop out there too suddenly—they may have old fashioned things such as rifles, too."

Del pointed to a cupboard. "Body armor," he said, and turned to the comm channel. "Gimme the boss. Batman and Robin are here, and they say they know where it's at..."

"I wish he'd save the code for the public," Illya muttered, slipping a bulky jacket and hood over his suit. A nylon fabric of complex weave, it was capable of stopping .30 machine gun slugs at ten yards.

They paused at the doorway and edged it open. There was a snap near the top of the door and a few splinters fell. "So they do," said Solo. "Let's see how high their angle of fire is."

Crouching, he grabbed a coat on a hangar and stuck out one shoulder about level with the knob. The door shook and the sound of two bullets impacting made his head ache more. He heard Del behind him saying something about a customer's coat, then Illya was pulling him to his knees. Painfully he forced his vision back into focus.

"They can't hit the steps or the bottom two feet of the door. Let's go." The two of them dragged the gun like a piece of pipe across the floor and slid it out onto the concrete stoop before crawling after it.

Illya crept up the six steps towards the sidewalk. "What would they do with innocent by-standers?" he wondered aloud as he peered cautiously down the street.

"They probably wandered off about the time the infrasonic started," Napoleon said, crouching beside the anti-tank rifle and fitting a massive magazine into place. "I know I would if I had a choice."

"There we go," the Russian said, changing the subject. "Just up the street. About under where Mr. Waverly's windows would be if they were real windows. And I'm afraid we'll need the armor-piercing. That always hurts my ears."

"Okay," said Solo. "This time you get to cover your ears while I pull the string. I'm checked out on Bouncing Betty here. What do they look like?"

"It's the big blue van on the north side of the street with TIDY DIDY on the back in faded pink."

"You're kidding."

"No; there are two rifles sticking out of the rear end, and I saw a muzzle flash from one about the time we lost a corner of the railing."

Napoleon Solo shook his head. "They have absolutely no sense of decency," he said. "Gimme a hand with this."

A slug plucked at Illya's hood once when he moved incautiously, but in thirty seconds the gun was set up, shielded by the heavy concrete of the steps leading up to the first floor. Illya covered his ears and squinted as Napoleon popped his head up once quickly to check his aim, and then let off a ranging round. A fan of fire washed lightly over the brick wall next to the door and concussion pummelled his chest. A section of pavement eight feet short of the truck burst into a shower of gravel and smoke, and Illya said, "Elevation five degrees and right just a notch."

"Not bad for an instinctive point-and-shoot gunner," said Napoleon, cranking in the corrections. "Cover your ears."

Illya did, and squinted through a crack that had appeared in the cement. The truck rocked visibly as he felt the heat from the backlash, and a black furrow ploughed along the near side of the body, tearing into the cab, which faced away from them.

"Left just a hair," said Illya coolly as a white scar appeared on the sidewalk six inches from his nose and white powder spurted into the air.

"Roger Wilcox," said Napoleon. "Hold your ears."

The gun thundered and leaped on its mount, and Napoleon peered through the shaken air, heedless of cover. Before his flash-dazzled eyes recovered, he heard Illya's voice faintly yelling, "Hit 'em again! Hit 'em again!"

Taking him at his word, Napoleon steadied the steaming weapon and fired two more rounds, two seconds apart, before a flare of ghastly yellow light filled the entire street. His stunned ears were totally numb, but as his vision cleared of dancing green flecks he saw Illya waving his arm horizontally, palm open and down. He leaned back against the side of the stairwell and waited for his head to return to its normal size.

He opened his eyes to see twelve men in dark suits pouring out of the entrance to the tailor shop and hurrying past Illya, who pointed them off down the street. He sat up. His ears weren't quite ready to resume operations yet, but his chest felt better.

He got to his feet and walked carefully over to Illya, who was also showing signs of recovery. Napoleon looked down the street to where the

shell of a blue van was charring in the swiftly-dying flame of the explosion. He stared at it, stunned anew, until he gradually became aware of someone saying something behind him. He turned and said, "What?"

"You forgot to say *hold your ears* that last time," Illya said. "If I lose my perfect pitch you'll be responsible."

"Sorry about that," said Napoleon sincerely. "But I thought you'd expect me to act on your directions at once."

"We'll let it go. I think both rounds made it into the fuel supply. I just hope there's enough of that damned thing left to analyze."

Sirens were wailing in the distance, drawing nearer, as they turned back into the tailor's shop, dragging the still-smoking anti-tank gun. "The fuzz are coming, Del," said Napoleon. "We can leave the explanations up to you —dealing with curious people is your specialty."

"Thanks loads," said Del Floria, as the two top agents disappeared into the second fitting booth, leaving the 75-mm recoilless in the middle of his floor. This would have to be a good one.

* * *

Inner Reception Station Three, back on post, ordered them to detour by way of Emergency Medical before they went in to see Alexander Waverly. Both were pronounced fit, given two salt tablets for shock and a small tranquilizer on general principles, and sent on their way.

Waverly was on the telephone as they entered.

"Of course, John. I quite understand your objection to the anti-tank shells. But we have good reason to believe several square blocks were saved from destruction or severe damage, and a few shattered windows seems a small price to pay...Yes, certainly we'll accept financial responsibility but I must request that City lawyers be found to represent our defense...Please accept my most sincere apologies for the incident, but you must understand that circumstances dictated our action. Certainly. Very well. Thank you." He replaced the handset and glared at Napoleon as if he were personally responsible.

"I request your help, Mr. Solo," he said, "in deciding what to tell the police to tell the press to tell several thousand individuals who were direct or indirect witnesses to your recent military action on East Fifty-Fourth Street."

Napoleon Solo cleared his throat and shifted his weight. "Ah, well, sir, it —ah—seemed like a good idea at the time, sir..."

Illya explained in a few thousand well-chosen words the way they had analyzed the situation and elected to take action. He claimed shared

responsibility with Napoleon and described in grisly detail the probable results of continued bombardment with properly attuned infrasonics. When he paused, Waverly said, "Well, Mr. Solo?"

"Ah, right, sir," said Napoleon. "What he just said."

"Hm. Very well. I'll have that paraphrased into an acceptable statement and slip it into channels. By the time it gets out no one will be able to recognize it anyhow. One other item which will brighten your day," he added after a pause. "The pulse transmitter embedded in Baldwin's stick has failed to send its last two scheduled signals."

"But it was guaranteed for six months," said Illya.

"It was also guaranteed undetectable," said Waverly. "I fear we have underestimated Ward Baldwin."

Napoleon nodded. "I thought it'd be good for a week at least. Where was it last heard from?"

Waverly sighed. "The Oyster Bar—in Grand Central Station." His fingertips drummed for a moment on the arm of his black leather chair. "I think we can take this for tentative validation of part of Baldwin's story, at any rate. Uncommonly overt action is being taken against us." He picked up a film cartridge and inserted it into a slot on the side of the desk. The room lights dimmed and a slightly fuzzy picture sprang up in blues and grays, bearing a title and code number.

"Right," said Napoleon. "That was just before we got the color VTR."

They watched after that in silence for three or four minutes while distorted radio voices exchanged pre-firing data and orders and the countdown marched away to nothing. At zero the screen flared suddenly white for a long moment before the seared vidicon tube and spasmed circuitry began to recover. Out of the blind gray of stunned photoconductors a picture formed again—the figure of a man sprawled across the breech of the monstrous, coiled gun which now burned with a flickering dull flame and black smoke. As horns and buzzers sounded on the audio, Waverly reached over and stopped the film, shifting it to rewind.

Only when the lights were all up did he speak, and his voice was bitter. "There it was. Simplest thing in the world, of course. Give us something sudden we don't understand—the flare of light—and follow it immediately with something we do. We forgot the first incident completely." He sucked on his pipe and made a face.

Neither Napoleon nor Illya said a word for four minutes while Alexander Waverly cleaned his pipe in a total concentration that even forbade the telephone to ring.

At last he finished and stuffed it about half full of the mixture from the humidor at the back of his desk. When he had it glowing to his satisfaction, he allowed a faint cloud of blue smoke to rise as he spoke slowly.

"Let us suppose," he said, "that some time in 1964 Joseph King found or was supplied with an individual of little value to him save that his general physical condition, scars, build and dimensions were nearly identical to his own. Almost certainly with the help of Thrush, who were known to be experimenting with cryogenic methods of preservation even then, he killed this man with a precisely measured and directed burst of radio energy, and took steps to freeze the body moments after this had been done. He then carefully arranged his own apparent demise and during the moment of our blindness he switched the prepared and frozen body into his own place and departed by some prearranged route. A jeep could have removed him from the site, given King's knowledge of our security system, if it were waiting just outside the danger area. King had portable shielding there; he could have ducked behind it and gotten out the door without coming into range of the camera again."

There was a moment's silence. Napoleon said, "You found out something else."

"As a matter of fact I did. While you were out disturbing the peace and destroying city property, I took advantage of the lull to investigate Mr. King's personal data sheet." He gestured toward the table with his pipe. "I opened it and developed the paper for *latent* fingerprints." He drew on the pipe again and let a plume of smoke curl towards the air intake.

"Then, when you were being repaired after your exploits, I called for and received the file of Carol Robinson, the only person authorized to handle the data records before they were sealed in plastic in 1961. The fingerprints," he said, "do not match. In any respect."

Illya was the first to say something. "King was Lab Chief. He had unlimited access to any part of the building, any time. He could have..."

"... Counterfeited a whole data packet," Napoleon finished the sentence for him. "Including sealing it in plastic and slipping it into his own file."

"Which means the fingerprints just found on the paper are almost certainly those of Joseph King himself," said Waverly. "The computer is presently checking them against the rest of our file, but another answer seems unlikely."

"But if he was frozen," said Napoleon, "why didn't the Bertillion measurements check out exactly?"

Illya answered that. "I'm reasonably certain King didn't know the Bertillion code. He had odd gaps in his knowledge. Mr. Simpson, now, not

only knows it, he has discovered some interesting correlations. No, I have another question entirely. The body was warm when we found it three minutes after the supposed accident—but there wasn't the least sign of decay or cellular damage. He must have been quick-frozen, but how could he have been thawed..." His speech faltered as a delayed connection was made.

Napoleon said chidingly, "Even I know the answer to that one. Do you want to retract your question? He was quick-thawed and cooked by the same burst."

"I wish you hadn't said that," said Illya.

After a pause, Napoleon said slowly, "So do I."

Chapter 3: "Where Would You Go If You Were Homesick For 1890?"

For three weeks following their three-minute war, Napoleon and Illya spent the days sitting around the commissary and various offices, engaged in low priority research or flirting as their tastes differed, and playing endless games of Superghosts or Botticelli. The former had precedence the Tuesday afternoon as they sat in the nearly-deserted lunch area on the second floor.

"K," said Napoleon.

"N, before," said Illya.

"S, after," answered Napoleon. "N, K, S."

Illya considered for a moment and said cagily, "T. After."

Napoleon studied his cup of coffee. "N, K, S, T." He tapped idly on the table with an unoccupied fingertip. "I think you're bluffing. I'll challenge."

"Inkstand," said the Russian. "G."

A concealed speaker mentioned their names softly and invited them to Waverly's office. Napoleon finished his coffee, crumpled the cup and lobbed it into a trash bin as he rose. "N, after. I wonder if the All Points Alert has finally paid off."

"You sound as if you didn't think we could find Baldwin."

"Do I? More like I'd almost rather we couldn't. Even if he is the key to this whole silly business. Until we straighten out his political situation we'll be in trouble." He frowned as they stepped into the elevator. "What are we doing in the middle of their politics, anyway? We're supposed to be their enemy."

"Enemies are usually in the middle of each others' politics," Illya said. "In fact from time to time I get the impression that if we didn't have enemies we wouldn't need politics at all. And by the way, I'm not going to add a U, nor am I going to fall for a polyconsonantal trap. Your language is mostly vowels. Add an I."

"Then I'll put another I on the front," said Napoleon, after a pause. The elevator door slid open.

"Add a T on the end," said Illya. "Do you want to concede now or think about it for a while?"

Napoleon stopped at the entrance to Waverly's office and scowled. "Not a chance. L at the beginning, and I think I've got you," he said, and tripped the door.

Their chief was seated at the master communications consol with a slim silver microphone in his hand, listening to a report from Santiago. He made

his recommendations while Solo and Kuryakin took their usual places at the table, then broke the connection and turned his chair to face them.

"Our Department of Useless Information has come up with one of the most tentative leads on record," he said. "If you feel it is worth anything, you may follow it up until something more promising comes in."

"What is it, sir?"

Waverly tossed a neatly printed eight-by-five brochure on the table and turned it towards them. "Cape May, New Jersey, is in the midst of a program that could not exactly be called urban renewal—under the direction of a local home-owner's association they are gradually restoring the town as a Victorian era beach resort. It seemed like the sort of thing that might attract Ward Baldwin, especially as the area is one of the least traveled and least-modernized parts of the Atlantic seaboard."

"We're at the height of the tourist season," said Illya non-committally. "Would Baldwin be likely to go to a resort area?"

"This one he might," said Napoleon. "Have you ever heard of it?"

"Only by geographical reference. It's the south tip of New Jersey."

"Neither have I, which means it is what the travel folders call 'undiscovered'. Baldwin would make it his business to know about it, especially if it's all Victorian."

"But a beach resort? I can't quite see Baldwin sunning himself on the public sands."

"I can," said Napoleon with a glazed look in his eyes. "He wears a blue-and-white striped bathing costume with a shirt..."

* * *

After the poisonous stenches of Newark and Elizabeth thinned to a colorless haze on the horizon and the bulk of the traffic dispersed into the tangled access ramps of Interstate 95, the Garden State Parkway ran wide and level southward. Glimpses of the sea flashed in the mid-morning sun far off to the left, and open farmlands rolled away through untainted air. The road narrowed by stages to two lanes in each direction with seventy and more feet of grass between and occasional neat stands of timber, and in time clumps of lank salt grass stood like clusters of green bayonets here and there along the shoulders.

It was quite definitely past time for lunch when Napoleon came off the end of the Parkway and followed the direction of a sign which said CAPE MAY 2. The low-slung car he drove bumped over the hump of a tiny drawbridge, and his attention was called to the hour by the sign of the Poseidon Grill, standing with an inviting open parking lot off the road to his

left. Without hesitation he tapped the signal lever and swung the wheel over. He could face his uncertain search for Ward Baldwin better on a full stomach, and he could consider specific direction of investigations while he ate.

Mixed seafood platters are a considered risk in the best places. Here the entr�e consisted of one shrimp, two scallops, a tuna cake, a plain fishcake and a square of sole, each in a soggy brown wrapper. The roll was tough enough to bounce and the cherry cheesecake was beyond description. Napoleon began to wonder if Ward Baldwin was really likely to be in this improbable corner of the world. He'd give it no more than two days.

He decided to let fortune carry him for a while and look around more or less at random. His first stop was in the heart of the three-block business district to pick up a map of hotels and motels—he'd have to show Baldwin's picture to every room clerk in town, more than likely. And that was too much like work. Illya liked leg-work; a pity he'd decided to stick around the office in case something else came in.

Maybe he could break it up a little. He took the first ten motels and spent three hours covering them, then put the candid portrait back into the glove compartment and returned to the middle of town.

It lacked fifteen minutes of six as he strolled idly into the store-front Town History Museum on Washington Street. The proprietor looked up through rimless glasses and said, "We're closing in quarter-hour."

"Oh, I'm just passing through," said Napoleon. "Like to take a look around." He thought of the photograph back in the car, and decided he could ask the gentleman here about Baldwin tomorrow. He would expect Baldwin to spend some time here, if he had been drawn to the area at all.

He wandered among glass cases for several minutes, lost in the idle contemplation of a more leisurely age, a more elegant age, of which only a few rare relics exist to remind us of all we have lost for all we have gained. Except for Ward Baldwin, who somehow seemed to have brought the best of that vanished world forward with him by sheer force of will.

He glanced up at the hollow tapping of high heels on the old wooden boards of the floor, and saw a girl in a fluffy blue dress outlined against the late afternoon sun entering the museum.

"Closin' five minutes, ma'am," said the proprietor. "'F y' come back tomorrah after ten I c'n give y' tour."

"Oh dear," she said, as Napoleon wandered over towards the desk. "I'm sorry—I thought you were open later." She looked up and fastened her large brown eyes on Napoleon's slightly startled ones.

Across the wide room a tall ebony clock cleared its throat and painfully and prematurely announced the hour. Neither of them moved until the last stroke faded. Only then did her eyes flick back to the proprietor. "But I'm to meet someone here in an hour..."

"Sorry, ma'am. My dinner'll be waitin'."

Napoleon would not have been Napoleon if he had not stepped into the breach at that precise moment. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but there's a small coffee shop at the end of this block where you could watch the street."

A bright, big-eyed smile glowed across her face as she turned to him. "Why, thank you." She batted her eyes exactly once, and turned back to the old man at the tall desk. "We'll be back tomorrow," she said sincerely and stepped lightly out the door with Napoleon Solo at her side. He wasn't quite sure how he got there, but they came out together and turned in the same direction. Just as he noticed this she said, "Are you just in from New York too?"

"Uh, yes," he said. "My name's Solo—Napoleon Solo."

"I'm Chandra Reynolds. I've been here a week. It's a lovely old town. Will you be here long?"

"I really don't know. I—uh—may be called away at any moment."

Her laugh tinkled lightly. "How terribly exciting! Are you on secret government business?"

"Oh no; just a very demanding business. Decisions—they're always calling on me."

"You've come to the right place, then. I'm not entirely sure this town can be reached by direct dialing. It's a wonderful place to escape from the rest of the world. *Do* join me for a cup of coffee?"

Winning the internal debate was the work of a second, and Napoleon accepted. Maybe *she* had seen Baldwin if she'd been here a week...but the photograph was still back in the car...but on the third hand it was after six, and he was off duty...

They chatted lightly of inconsequentials over a dinner that more than made up for lunch, and were sipping coffee when Chandra looked up and waved excitedly through the window. "Oh! There he is!" A moment later a long blue car pulled to the curb in the gathering dusk and a broad-shouldered, square-faced man in khaki work clothes got out and entered the restaurant.

As he approached, Chandra said brightly, "Hi, darling! This is Mr. Solo, from New York. The museum closes at *six*, honey, not seven. Mr. Solo, this is my husband, Ed. He was working out at the dig today while I went exploring the town."

"How d'you do, Mr. Solo," said Ed, and exchanged a firm and slightly callused handshake. He took a seat beside Chandra and they started discussing the remains of an ancient Amerind campsite they were excavating for some college in New England.

In the course of the conversation, Napoleon found himself almost at once on a first-name basis, and eventually invited to come out to the dig tomorrow for a look around.

"Oh no," said Chandra. "Mr. Solo and I promised the nice man at the town museum we'd be back tomorrow morning to take his tour. You won't have anything for me to translate for another day."

* * *

They had lunch together after seeing the museum, and Napoleon showed her the photograph of Ward Baldwin. She studied it intensely and said, "I'm not really sure. There was an old man sitting in the town square a few days ago—I noticed him because he looked almost like part of the decoration, if you know what I mean."

Before Napoleon, heartened in his doubtful quest, started on the afternoon's dreary routine, he promised to meet Chandra and Ed for dinner. The next day he did go out to the dig area, where he was shown a lot of apparently identical pieces of pottery and arrowheads and some charred wood. He was more than willing to extend his stay indefinitely as Chandra suggested, but that evening after he had returned to his motel, his communicator signaled.

"Good evening, Napoleon," said a familiar Russian voice. "How would you like to meet me in Philadelphia tomorrow afternoon about three? We've found Baldwin."

* * *

"*You* spotted him, tailed him and photographed him?" said Napoleon Solo doubtfully.

"That's right," said the slender girl with the intent, serious face. Her name was Terri Harris, and she was the local contact for UNCLE's seldom-employed Section A. "I'm sorry about the quality of the photograph—the only time I had a camera available was when I spotted him coming out of a building downtown while we were in the car. I grabbed my brother's Instamatic and shot from about fifteen feet as we went by."

"Mr. Simpson fed it to his computer, reduced the grain with a Fourier Transformation and took out the blur with something else. Then the computer was able to read enough of the image to identify it positively as

Baldwin by comparison with the rest of our file," Illya explained. "It took about twenty minutes."

"But how did you know we were looking for him?" Napoleon persisted.

"His picture was in the monthly operations summary you sent out for July. I asked some of the kids at my school to notice if they saw somebody who looked like that. From what the report said I thought he might like a place like Philadelphia."

"You're fifteen, aren't you."

"I beg your pardon? Yes, I am."

"Illya," said Napoleon aggrievedly, "what are we doing bringing a girl into this? Ward Baldwin is dangerous. And he knows a lot of dangerous people. And she was following him around?"

"He's behaving himself perfectly," said Illya.

"I have his hotel and room number," Terri volunteered. "You can phone him, if you like."

Napoleon sighed and shook his head. "Will you want to come along on the stake-out tomorrow? I'd like to meet him face to face; if I phoned he'd probably hang up on me."

"I'd love to," she said, "but I have homework. I can take the afternoon off, though, if I won't be in the way."

"You needn't come armed," said Napoleon uncertainly.

* * *

They took up their positions at eight the next morning in a traditional parked car across the street and a few yards down. Terri joined them shortly past twelve and started learning about their operations, asking and observing, while they exchanged reminiscences. At twenty minutes to one Ward Baldwin stepped out of the main entrance to the hotel.

Napoleon reached across Terri and opened the curb door. "You get out. If he doesn't want us to see him he may get nasty."

"I'll wait here and watch," she said as she slipped to the curb.

"If he comes back without us," said Illya, "don't try to stop him. If he leaves again, call Headquarters at once and tell them."

"Right," she said, and ducked out of sight into a doorway as a gray Lincoln with its rear windows curtained drew up across the street and Ward Baldwin exchanged a few words with the driver. Then he got in and the car pulled away.

The starter whirred and the engine caught as Illya turned the key, and their own undistinguished-looking car with a most distinguished engine and

certain other modifications made an illegal U-turn and rounded the next corner in time to see the gray Lincoln turn two blocks ahead into Broad Street.

Soon they were several cars back in medium dense traffic, heading south towards the City Hall. Soon the Lincoln shifted lanes to the right, and then turned on Race. Illya closed the distance between them gradually until only one car separated them when the Lincoln turned left on Sixteenth Street and accelerated. He let them go, making the turn at his leisure, and saw them brake at the second light ahead.

He kept well back after that, only watching through the knotted traffic for an occasional glimpse of the low gray chassis. At last it made another left on Latimer and turned into a large parking structure. As they cruised past, Napoleon could clearly see the Lincoln turn into the ramp heading down.

"Want to follow it and see what it eats?" he asked.

"They'd probably notice if we came right in."

"Once around the block, then."

They made it halfway. A small door between two shop fronts was diffidently identified as the Convenience Entrance of the same garage, and a parking space stood miraculously open nearby. A firm believer that miracles are not to be ignored, Illya zipped smoothly into it and locked the doors as Napoleon fed the parking meter.

Inside they were confronted with concrete and the clammy stench of the modern stable. Ahead daylight showed through the open lanes; a door labeled 'stairs' blocked a frame to their right.

"Which way did they go?"

"Down."

"This door's locked. Want to check the front?"

"Why not."

The attendant drowsed in his air-conditioned glass cage, facing the street, and remained unaware of the two UNCLE agents as they crept quietly around the end of the cement pier that protected the descending ramp. A sheet of steel which rolled down from the ceiling covered it, and a sawhorse-mounted sign said SORRY—TEMPORARILY FILLED. SPACE RESERVED FOR REGULAR CUSTOMERS.

They withdrew as silently as they had come, and a moment later Illya murmured, "Those looked like fairly irregular customers to me. I think I'd like to try the lock on that back door."

The lock was a good commercial model, but it surrendered in seconds to a set of non-commercial instruments and the two found themselves in a stairwell. Shielded bulbs cast yellow parabolas on the stained concrete walls. Without pause they hurried silently down the steps.

At the bottom another lock faced Illya's deft manipulations, but before it gave way they heard the faint sounds of voices.

"The elevator will take you directly up," said one. "Turn right when you get out."

"Thank you," said a familiar harsh precise voice.

A moment later footsteps approached, and the door was pulled open. It is doubtful that either of the two men knew what hit them.

"I'll bet they were going up," said Napoleon. "Let's catch that elevator."

They didn't exactly sprint up the stairs, but they made good time. They passed the first level on Napoleon's hunch, but checked the second. There was no door for an elevator; they took the next flight two at a time.

A nondescript door was closing in the wall and they peered cautiously out and listened. Instead of the cavernous hollow sound of the other levels, they heard the crisp close reverberations of slow footsteps with the occasional tap of a cane. Closing the stair door silently behind them and blocking the latch, they followed the sounds into a corridor which turned a right angle every twenty or thirty feet for some distance. Concealed fluorescents shed an even shadowless light along the steel paneling. Illya caught Solo's eye once with a suspicious *now-what-are-you-getting-us-into* look, but they saw no signs of opposition.

After the fourth turn, they heard another door open and the footsteps ahead paused. On silent feet they moved past the next turn and saw Baldwin's back disappear through a frosted glass door set in one of the identical wall panels. A concealed detent showed its return, and on impulse Napoleon leaped forward and caught it silently just before it latched. He thumped it lightly with his fist to satisfy waiting ears, and beckoned to Illya with a toss of his head.

Faint voices muttered in the next room, and faded as the speakers moved away. Gently Napoleon eased the heavy door open a crack and peered through. Baldwin and a short Chinese girl were just going through a door on the far side of an empty office. As the far door closed, Solo opened his and Illya followed him into the room, looking uneasily around.

And was plunged into total darkness a fraction of a second before a shrill buzzer sounded. The silence was shattered and other sounds grew around them. Something coughed and roared hugely on the other side of the far door, and was joined by a chorus as things slammed and two or three

voices shouted. Bright bluish light grew beneath the far door, and by the glow Napoleon and Illya looked at each other.

They weren't sure what was behind that door, and they didn't think they were equipped to find out. Nonetheless, they might never have another chance...Together they hurried to the inner door.

They hit it side by side just before a dropping bar wedged into its rests, and two gray-suited figures were bowled backwards by the force of their rush through the door. Napoleon and Illya skidded to a halt and gaped into the room that lay revealed to them.

Where acres of cars could have parked, rows of diesel-powered trucks stood facing the ramps, coughing out smoke. Men in gray coveralls ran about fastening down sidepanels emblazoned with the faded and dirty insignia of two dozen old and reputable trucking firms. As the first rank engaged their clutches and rolled off, the last ones were inhaling lengths of black cable. Shots splattered the brickwork a few feet above their heads, and they jumped back and slammed the door.

"Illya," said Napoleon aggrievedly, "what's going on here?"

"I have a silly idea..."

"What?"

"You'd laugh."

Illya pushed the door open again and peered out. The last truck revved its engine and swung toward the open ramp downward, where another steel sheet was already beginning to roll down from above. As it passed, four men in gray coveralls with black berets broke from cover; two even paused to fire once more at the doorway where Illya stood staring before they swung aboard the open tailgate, with hands reaching out to help them up as the truck sped up and roared around the corner.

The mutter of its engine faded as Illya gradually eased the door all the way open and stood up. The two men they had knocked over were gone, and the place was spotless except for a few oil stains on the floor at regular intervals. Slowly they walked out into the vast empty room and looked around.

A scrap of paper, caught in the dying eddys of the last truck's departure, fluttered across the concrete towards them and stopped. Illya bent and picked it up automatically.

It was an unused piece of note paper with MEMO: in fair-sized letters beneath the neat black symbol of the fighting thrush. He showed it to Napoleon.

Solo looked at it for a minute, then looked at his partner with mixed awe and disbelief. "Aw, no," he said. "We didn't just walk into the middle of

Thrush Central, did we?"

Illya looked at him and shook his head sadly. "I told you you'd laugh," he said. "But I'll bet Ward Baldwin didn't."

Chapter 4: "Sugar Maple And Pine"

"This one was spotted by pure luck, Mr. Solo," the pilot yelled over the racket of the rotors. The radio-summoned helicopter had picked them up from the roof of the garage on Latimer Street and was now following the direction of a ground station. "It ran a red light about a minute after you put in the call and traffic control spotted it. The other ones must have gotten away."

Below them, a middle-sized semi thundered along the Schuykill Expressway. The pilot throttled back to stay well behind him and fairly high. "We can't stop him until he gets back onto the streets or hits open country, so we'll just have to stay with him."

It was fifteen tense minutes from the time they picked him up in Fairmount Park before the truck lumbered into an offramp for Conshohocken and turned north. Radio summoned cars to the area for support while the copter itself began to swing back and forth across the road in front of the speeding diesel, forcing it gradually to a standstill. Guns drawn, Napoleon and Illya leaped out and ran towards the cab, where a black-jacketed driver was starting to get out.

"Hold it right there," yelled Solo, and the man froze, one hand on the door handle and one foot in mid-air. "That's right. Now let that foot down slowly and back out."

The driver did as he was told, and turned a terrified face towards the two UNCLE agents. "Is this a hold-up?"

"You might say that," said Illya. "What's in there?" He gestured with his automatic towards the back of the truck.

The man's head followed his gesture, and then looked back with eyes wide. "Bricks, mister. Just bricks."

"Okay," said Napoleon. "Open it up. I want to see your bricks."

The driver looked at him as if he had just lost his mind, and the ghost of a doubt twitched in Napoleon's stomach. "Okay, mister, anything you say. They ain't *my* bricks." He eased himself slowly to a walking position, glancing at the two leveled automatics from time to time, and led them to the rear of the truck. There he threw back two bolts and swung the doors wide.

Inside, stacked on pallets, were piles and piles of bricks. They could see enough space down the sides to be sure no concealed compartments opened through the walls.

As they stared, both communicators chirped for attention and Waverly's voice spoke crisply. "Well, what have you found?"

"It's full of bricks, sir," said Illya hesitantly.

"Well, check the license number. Check the registration. Verify the driver's identity. Don't let anything out of your sight. Oh—Mr. Simpson tells me we will probably have to examine each brick carefully; they could easily be disguised memory units. Or only a few of them might be. And check his bills of lading and receipt book. Hang it, check everything! I'll be there with Mr. Simpson in two hours."

When the support forces arrived, Solo put them in charge of the truck with orders to wait for Mr. Waverly while the driver sat on the cab step with his head in his hands. As Solo started to get back into the helicopter, the man looked up and shook his fist. "You're gonna cost me my job, you..." The engine fired and the rest of his statement was lost to the world in a thunder of rotor blades and exhaust as they lifted.

Ten minutes later they switched to their own car and sped back to Baldwin's hotel. As they pulled up to the curb, Terri stepped out of a doorway to greet them. "Baldwin got back here about twenty-five minutes ago," she said, "and hasn't come out this way."

"Let's go in and see if we can patch things up," said Napoleon.

They hurried into the lobby and asked for the bearded man with a cane —and found he had checked out fifteen minutes ago and taken a cab from the basement garage.

Terri stood and looked seriously at them as they walked back from the hotel to where she stood by the parked car. "You didn't find him," she said.

"I'm afraid he's gone again," said Illya.

"Oh well," said Napoleon resignedly, "we were close."

* * *

Even Alexander Waverly showed traces of despair when Napoleon and Illya finished reporting to him four days later.

"He was from a brickyard half a mile west of where Thrush Central was located, and his orders were checked out and cleared—he was on his way to a construction site in Seven Stars," said Solo.

"At last report, the investigation team had gotten about two-thirds of the bricks checked—thoroughly negative so far," said Kuryakin.

"They won't find anything," said Waverly. "We all know the truck was a red herring. What is more irritating is the loss of Baldwin again. Mr. Bigglestone of our San Francisco office reports two attempts to introduce high explosives into their building; Chicago has stood off two overt attacks in the last three days. The other Continental Chiefs tell me daily of increased harassment from Thrush since your ill-timed invasion of their

innermost sanctum. And have you described in detail the methods you used to circumvent the complex of alarm systems you must have foiled?"

"Well," said Solo, "we went right in behind Ward Baldwin—I guess they thought we were with him."

Waverly poked at his cold pipe with a bony fore-finger. "Apparently they continued to think so after they found out who you were. It would seem Baldwin had sought out Thrush Central, probably to make a final attempt at reconciliation or negotiation. When you walked in on his tail, the obvious interpretation was that you were the vanguard of an invading force with Baldwin as the betrayer. I can't think how he could have escaped, but he obviously did."

"Well, we can hardly blame him for leaving town so suddenly, then," said Illya.

"And now we've offended him," said Napoleon, "and he's probably gone off in a snit and will refuse to be found until it wears off or someone can talk him out of it." He sighed. "It may be a while."

* * *

August became September and Ward Baldwin was not seen again. Waverly sent Solo and Kuryakin off on another assignment for three weeks, but their hearts weren't really in it. Summer faded slowly, and the first hints of autumn began to show in New York City. The skirts stayed short, but gusty breezes whipped unexpectedly around corners more often and sweaters began to appear.

One Monday morning early in the month Illya was in mid-town Manhattan on personal business when a sudden shower drove him to take refuge in the doorway of the Automat facing Bryant Park on Sixth Avenue. The sky had been low and leaden all morning, hanging like dirty cotton batting strung among the skyscrapers, oozing a chill dampness, and finally allowed its load of misery to fall on the sooty city beneath. While pedestrians scampered from the spattering drops, fat speckled pigeons huddled high on building ledges and shook their wings angrily at the indignities of the weather.

Illya looked out into the shadowless muted grays, considering the temperature and the condition of the storm fronts he had noticed on the morning weather display, and gave it one chance in three of letting up within the hour. Opting for the lesser evil, he turned and pushed through the bronze doors polished by millions of hands into Horn & Hardart's. A dollar and a quarter later he seated himself at a tray-sized table alone amid the cluster of strangers, right by the window, with a cheering hot meal in front

of him. He just started to pour the milk when a flicker of movement caught his eye and he glanced up.

The cardboard carton froze in mid-air, halfway to the glass, as he recognised the cheerful motherly face of Irene Baldwin eight feet away. She wore a faded dress and a knit sweater; an old black shawl covered her head and she was nodding to him. She seemed to have just appeared, and she was carrying a small tray with something on it.

Illya closed his mouth as she approached, and started to put the milk down. She stopped beside his tiny table, smiled at him significantly as he started to rise, and placed the tray before him. He looked down at it uncomprehendingly. There in a small white vase stood a leaf and a twig. He looked up again and got to his feet, but Irene was no longer there. He thought he saw the back of a faded dress in a flicker through the crowd around the cashier's desk, but he couldn't be sure.

Then he saw her outside, with a wide black umbrella, hurrying up the sidewalk. She waved as she passed him, and was lost to view down Sixth in a few seconds. Illya stared helplessly into the rain after her for a while, then looked back at the little vase. Cheap ceramic, but a pleasing design, he thought. And a leaf, and a stick. No, a little branch of pine, with tufts of green needles sticking out of the wolf-gray bark. He picked it up and sniffed it. Fresh. He weighed it in his hand and looked at the leaf. Three-pointed, and already starting to turn color. But it was also still moist and soft. Jagged edges...What was it? Maple? He turned slowly and stared out the window again. *Irene Baldwin???*

He looked back down at his own tray, and licked his dry lips. He'd eat it, since he'd paid for it and needed the food. But his appetite was utterly destroyed, and the meal was as ashes in his mouth.

Section II: "Tradition, Form And Ceremonious Duty."

Chapter 5: "Why Mr. Solo! What A Surprise!"

It was obviously a clue—everyone agreed as far as that went. Illya held to the opinion that it was a direct hint and they would be expected to follow it up at once, winning Napoleon to his side in short order. The pine suggested Maine to both of them, but Mr. Waverly pointed out that sugar maples were more prevalent in Vermont and pine was their state tree.

"The leaves are just starting to turn up there," Napoleon said generously. "Illya, do you want to take the field first this time?"

"I'll stay with central heating," said Illya. "Besides, you know the area and can pronounce those names. I've rarely had an opportunity to fight international conspiracies in Vermont."

* * *

Tuesday afternoon Napoleon Solo drove his rented car off the Lake Champlain Ferry and up a ramp into downtown Burlington, Vermont. His hotel reservations were in order; once again his first stop was the Chamber of Commerce for a listing of available accommodations. It was possible that Ward Baldwin still might not want to be found, even if Irene thought he'd avoided them long enough, and it looked as if he would have to go back to showing pictures at hotel desks and bookstores.

Wednesday featured a breakfast that was a little too heavy, an uninspiring lunch, and a lot of strangers who had never seen Ward Baldwin. Dusk found Napoleon sitting, dejected, on a bench in the curve of Battery Park, looking out over the darkening waters of the lake to where the largest western sky he had ever seen spread curtains of orange, blue, pink, purple and gold above the setting sun. He hardly noticed it at first, but he lit a cigarette and set his mind to relaxing and eventually, when the sunset had faded to smoke and embers, he rose, feeling not so much refreshed as eased.

The silhouette on the bench over near the cannon seemed somehow familiar, and he looked more closely when he neared. The girl looked up as he passed beneath the solitary streetlight, and wide brown eyes batted.

"Why Mr. Solo! What a surprise!" said Chandra Reynolds, extending a hand to him. "What in the world brings you up to Burlington?"

Napoleon paused in mid-stride and nearly lost his balance. "Well!" he said. "Uh—hi there!"

"Wasn't the sunset nice tonight?" she said brightly. "*Do* sit down—I think Lake Champlain has some of the most beautiful sunsets in the world. Have you been in town long?"

"Uh, no. I got in yesterday."

"Still on vacation?"

"No—I'm here on business this time."

"Isn't it a delightful coincidence? Ed and I finished the dig in New Jersey just about two weeks ago and our finds have been arriving bit by bit for the last five days. He'll probably be meeting me here in a few minutes after he closes up the office. You *must* join us for dinner."

"Well, I..."

"Oh, now, your business can't keep you busy all night too. You ought to have a union to prevent it. Besides, you should know you can't do business with anyone but friends after hours in New England. Oh—there he is now!" She stood up and fluttered a handkerchief as a long blue car pulled into the south entrance of the park. It braked silently to a halt by them, and Ed Reynolds leaned out.

"Well, hi, Napoleon. What are you doing in Burlington? Hey, how's about joining us for dinner? There's a great little hamburger stand just north of town..."

"Oh, Ed, we should take him to Bove's—that little Italian place on Pearl Street."

"But really, I..."

"Come on, Napoleon," said Ed heartily. "All work and no play is bad for the nerves."

He was half into the front seat when he remembered his own car, at the curb across the park. They assured him they'd bring him back, the parking was unlimited, and he might not be able to follow them to the restaurant. He gave up.

Over dinner they extracted a promise from him to drop out to the University in a day or two to look over the results of their excavation in Cape May County, and after sharing a split of the excellent house red and espresso, they parted in the darkness of Battery Park once again. Napoleon started his car and drove carefully back to his motel. Halfway there he remembered they didn't know where he was staying, he didn't know where they were, and nothing had been specified about meeting again. *Oh well*, he decided, *I expect I'll run into them from time to time*.

* * *

Between bookstores the next afternoon his pocket transceiver chirped. "How are you doing up in the wilderness?" Illya asked.

"Surviving. It's not really so bad—they have electricity in, and even a few radios. How are things in the brawling metropolis? I presume you're

doing everything in your power to gain information—any more word from Foxy Grandpa?"

"Not the quiver of a whisker. I eat lunch at the Automat every day in case Irene decides to drop another hint. But we have a possibility for you to check out right there in town. Section Four's Magic Computer is cross-checking every piece of data we have, and just noticed a Dr. Fraser who's booked in as guest lecturer in chemistry at the University of Vermont this semester. That's Dr. W.B. Fraser."

"Fraser?" said Napoleon. "That's Baldwin's middle name."

"Uh-huh," said Illya. "You'll find the University straight up Main Street. Turn left into the campus."

* * *

The campus of U.V.M. looked like an idealized New England college, with smooth leaf-sprinkled lawns, old solid brick buildings with white columns, and a tree-shaded quadrangle in the middle. Napoleon loitered there, watching the students hurry past on their own errands, until he observed a chemistry text under a corduroy-clad arm.

"Ah, I beg your pardon," Napoleon said. "Could you tell me where I could find Dr. W.B. Fraser?"

"He'll either be in his office in Williams Hall or out at the Bomb Shop, unless he has a lecture this hour."

"The Bomb Shop?"

"It's a temporary building on the far side of the campus—his private research facility."

"Where's Williams Hall?"

"Right there," said the student, raising a free arm and indicating one of several buildings that stood along the east edge of the Quad. Solo thanked him and followed his direction.

Inside the stone walls were white-painted and short corridors opened to right and left of a small entry hall. A modest signboard with movable letters said that Dr. Fraser was on the second floor, and Solo went up the wide central staircase.

Behind a bright orange door marked FRASER a pretty dark-haired girl sat at a desk checking papers. Napoleon's identification was definite in the fraction of a second before she looked up—it wasn't Baldwin. He said, "Ah, Dr. Fraser?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "He's lecturing in 208 this hour. He might be able to see you for just a minute at four-thirty, but he has two students scheduled for consultation and then he's handling a graduate research group." She

found a loose-leaf appointment book and checked it. "He's free at ten tomorrow, but the Convocation's at one in the afternoon..."

She's his secretary, Solo reasoned, and said, "Ah, well, I'm not absolutely sure it's Dr. Fraser I want to see. He's about my height, looks in his sixties, ratty beard, walks with a limp?"

"Except for the beard that's Dr. Fraser. I think he has a *nice* beard."

"He may have trimmed it. Are you a friend of his?"

"Golly no. I'm a secretarial graduate, but I had a chem minor so Dr. Fraser had the department assign me as his secretary."

"Is that standard procedure?"

"Hardly. But Dr. Fraser is very highly regarded, and I guess the Board was willing to give him some extras."

"Like the Bomb Shop."

"Uh-huh. I guess it's the wages of prestige."

"I guess. Well, look, I can drop by tomorrow morning. It's not really that important."

"Okay," she said, and returned to her papers as he closed the door and turned back up the hall. It sounded like Baldwin in more ways than one; the physical description fit and Solo was willing to grant that the beard could simply be a matter of taste; also Baldwin would be likely to demand—and get—as many special privileges and perquisites as possible. Well, there was one way of being sure. Where did she say he was lecturing? Two-oh-eight?

An arrow with the same digits directed him down another hall and around a corner into a backwater with a Coke machine, a fire bucket, an old ladder leaning against a wall beneath draped coat racks, and a single door with a rippled glass panel and the numbers 208.

Napoleon Solo eased the door open a crack and heard the familiar harsh, precise voice saying, "... understand the exact nature of the carbon bond. You are all familiar with the simpler hydrocarbons from your weekend parties..." Napoleon drew back. It sounded like him.

Taking a deep breath he opened the door wide enough to stick his head all the way around the corner and look right at the lectern. As the latch clattered, every head in the main room swiveled to stare at him. Ward Baldwin looked coolly back at him from behind the demonstration table and gave him a crisp civil nod before clearing his throat sharply and bringing every eye back to himself.

"Some of you may recall from last semester the formation of the Benzene Ring. If you are confident of your ability to explain its bonding

mechanism in words of one syllable, you may glance through chapter eleven while the rest of us re-examine..."

The door closed without a creak, for which Napoleon was profoundly thankful. He felt sure he had blushed just then, and he hated the thought. But at least he had found Baldwin and didn't seem about to lose him again. As he started down the stairs, he wondered briefly if that were really as much of a triumph as it might seem.

Chapter 6: "*Attenta! Pericolo!*"

When Convocation was held in full scholastic ritual at one o'clock the next afternoon, seated somewhere behind the freshmen and trying not to look conspicuous were Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin and Alexander Waverly. Ward Baldwin sat among his faculty, his mortarboard precisely level, his gown faultlessly hung and edged with the colors of Dublin University and the single stripe indicating his Doctorate of Science. If he observed his three friends in the audience, he gave no sign.

At last the stately procession wound out and the audience rose to follow in ragged lines, clotting in murmuring groups in the foyer of the gymnasium. The UNCLE party, led by Solo, was passing unnoticed among them when a bright voice rang out above the babble.

"Oh, Napoleon! Hi there!"

It was Chandra again, her pale face framed in dark hair and a large circular hat. Deftly she floated towards them, saying, "I thought I'd run into you here. Doesn't Ward look fine in his robes?"

Mr. Waverly squinted up at Napoleon, who shifted his weight as he absorbed the last rhetorical question. He fell back on the proprieties. "Mr. Waverly, I'd like to introduce Chandra Reynolds. Chandra, this is my, ah, boss. And this is my partner, Illya Kuryakin."

Her eyes fastened on Alexander Waverly and shone with innocent delight. "So *you're* the person who keeps Mr. Solo so busy all the time! He's really a very good agent, honestly."

Napoleon choked on his tongue and got an unreadable look from Illya. Recovering, he said, "Ah, Chandra's *husband*, Ed, is with the Archaeology Department here. I ran into them in Cape May. In New Jersey. Last month when I was down there. You remember..."

"I take it you know Ward Baldwin," said Waverly, with an odd smile.

"*Know* him? Why, I love him! Even though I do know him better than anyone but Irene, I still love him." Her voice dropped just a bit. "They sort of adopted me, a long time ago. They taught me nearly everything I know. Irene is closer to me than my own mother." Like Baldwin, she gave the name its British pronunciation, with all three vowels long.

"You knew Ward Baldwin last month in Cape May, then."

"Oh, Napoleon, I *am* sorry, but Ward made us both promise not to tell you he was there until he'd taken one more chance to talk directly to the Council. You didn't even get there until six days after he'd left, and I thought he'd be back any minute. Irene had told me what was happening,

and we agreed he ought to see you as soon as possible. She said I should keep you around until Ward got back, but then you took off."

Napoleon glanced embarrassedly at Illya and Waverly and said, "Well, I thought he'd be back and would have stayed, but I was ordered to Philadelphia."

Chandra shook her head. "Irene told me all about it before Ward did. He was awfully upset with you—he insists the Council was on the verge of finding in his favor, even though the Computer was against him—honestly, sometimes he thinks the thing has a personal grudge—and you charged in waving your guns and yelling."

Illya stared. "I never yelled," he said. "Did you?"

"Illya, you should know me better than that. What's more, my gun never even left my holster."

"Neither did mine. In the excitement I forgot to draw."

Chandra laughed, a bright tinkle. "I told Ward I didn't believe him about that—I told him what I thought of you, Mr. Solo, and told him just why you couldn't have done anything that simply."

Illya asked, as if he were changing the subject, "I don't suppose Ward told you what happened then?"

"Well, he escaped."

"Did he tell you how?"

"Yes—but I don't believe that either."

There was a pause. "So then he just came up here a little earlier to get ready for classes," she concluded.

"I'll bet you found him the job."

"Not exactly—Ed talked the Science Department into inviting him to come for a semester three years ago; he's just been too busy until this nonsense with King came up. He really likes it here—he's made progress on lots of things he's been putting aside for years, and the weather seems to agree with him."

"It wouldn't dare disagree," muttered Napoleon.

Chandra laughed again. "That's just what Irene said two weeks ago."

"Is she here?" Illya asked, glancing around.

"No, she's hiding somewhere. She and Ward nearly had words about his refusing to get in touch with you, and they compromised on that hint she left. But she's still worried that King may find him and she wants to keep an escape route open. Even Ward doesn't know where she is. But they keep in touch."

Napoleon realized something else and gave voice to a grievance. "You even knew about Baldwin night before last. You let me tramp half the streets of Burlington talking to people who probably thought I was some kind of nut. You probably would have let me go on for a week."

"No I wouldn't, silly," she said affectionately. "Ward made me promise not to give you any more hints after you got here. But I'd promised myself if you hadn't found him in five days I would have given you a little clue. That was why Ed invited you to come to the campus—you had a better chance of running into him accidentally. And he wasn't really mad at you any more, he was just used to the idea that he was. See? If you'd spent more time relaxing and less time working, you would have found him a lot sooner."

There was another pause—a longer one, broken at last by Waverly. "Would you care to come with us to his office, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Oh, he's not at his office—he's out at the Bomb Shop. He asked me last night to meet you here and direct you to it."

"Hm. He seems to know my plans before I do." Waverly released a rare chuckle. "Let's go see him and find out when I am expected."

* * *

"Actually, Mr. Solo, I had expected you two days earlier. Irene told me she saw Mr. Kuryakin on Monday, and I gave you Tuesday to interpret her communication."

"I arrived Tuesday, sir, but out cryptanalysis section wouldn't get more specific than Vermont."

"You needn't have searched the entire state. This is the University, after all—you would hardly have expected to find me grubbing about back in the woods."

"Well, since your life was in danger, we weren't sure..."

"Nonsense. My life has been in danger ever since it began. I have simply learned to take reasonable precautions."

"I'd be interested to know what you consider 'reasonable precautions'," Illya said.

Baldwin pointed at the open door of the Bomb Shop, where a signboard the height of the doorway and eighteen inches wide hung. In red on white, it was headed ATTENTA! PERICOLO! Beneath this, the English read DANGER—KEEP OUT. In only slightly smaller letters, the rest of the sign started with *Peligro, Gefahr, Fare, Perigo, Veszely* and *Primejdie*; worked its way through Cyrillic and Green characters, ran down past *Opasnost, Niebezpieczenstwo, Bahaja* and *Tehlike*; included samples of the more

popular Oriental scripts and trailed off into three alphabets even Illya didn't recognize.

The five of them sat around a small but comfortably furnished room which filled the front quarter of the converted Quonset hut that housed one of the best-planned chemical research labs of its size the UNCLE visitors had seen; they'd spent the better part of an hour being shown around by its proprietor, designer and chief occupant before he would consent to talk business. It had been Chandra, finally, who had insisted on a cup of tea and refused to drink it standing up.

With the tea had come the long-awaited conversation. The clear Vermont sun streamed in the door to ease the slight chill, and eventually Illya brought up Topic A. "Well," he said casually, "how are things with Thrush?"

"Not well, I fear," said Baldwin. "There are twelve other candidates besides myself and King. Since your ill-timed intrusion in Philadelphia, attempts have been made on the lives of eight. For valid reasons every attack has failed, but each has left some indication that either your forces were or I personally was responsible." He paused. "I'm also stung by the assumption that I would repeatedly fail in such a simple task as an assassination."

"King wouldn't be likely to fail if he didn't want to," Chandra observed. "I think you ought to get right to work with whatever Mr. Waverly can tell you about what they've been doing and figure out what they're likely to do if they find you. After all, if UNCLE knows, the rest of the world soon will."

Baldwin nodded. "I'd planned to, Chandra." He levered himself up from his chair. "Would you be a good girl and clean up the tea things? We must get over to my office for the case. Perhaps we could make a test run this afternoon. I take it, Mr. Waverly, that you could spare us a few hours—I may be able to offer you some detailed advice later." He took his mortarboard from the end table, balancing himself on an ebony-and-staghorn cane Napoleon thought he recognized. "For that matter, if you could spare us the evening, there will be a dance in connection with the opening of the football season."

Chandra sparkled at Napoleon and Illya. "Oh, *do* come! We just got a new shipment from Cape May, and Ed will be cataloguing it until midnight. And I'm just *no* help at something like that. I'll need someone to be with until he gets there. Napoleon, you *will* escort me, won't you?"

Illya gave him a look. "How about me?" he said.

"Oh, Mr. Kuryakin, I'm sure we'll be able to find someone for you. So many young men are away in the war."

Illya looked her right in the eye. "Some of us are at war right here," he said.

Napoleon caught the edge in his tone and said, "As a matter of fact, Dr. Fraser's secretary is cute. Dark hair, good figure..."

"Miss Stier? You may see her at my office. Good afternoon, Chandra—and thank you."

Baldwin led the way from the Bomb Shop across stubbly grass to the street. There was a light breeze, and the air was clean enough to flush the last city air from their lungs. Baldwin's black overcoat with the Astrakhan collar stumped along in contrast to Waverly's slightly shorter camelshair as Napoleon and Illya took up a fifty-yard lead after a moment spent saying goodbye to Chandra.

"What precisely do you have to show us?" Alexander Waverly asked.

Baldwin's voice was made harsher and less even by the strain of walking, but he answered. "When I left San Francisco, Waverly, I was fleeing for my life. I was able to bring very little with me, so I chose the most valuable items I could lay my hands on at once. They are valueless to you and could never be sold, but they may yet defeat King, even with Central and the Ultimate Computer itself behind him."

Waverly nodded and pondered Baldwin's words like a riddle. "You carried these with you, I assume."

"In an attache case. Program tapes copied from limited access areas through my Satrap Satellite, containing data on Strategic Programming, Operational Coding, Basic Field Directives and other topics of practical interest. With the help of the campus computer facility..."

"... You have a good probability of predicting what direction their future actions will take. Unless they are aware of your possession of the copies."

"They aren't," said Baldwin simply.

Napoleon and Illya hurried up beside them, and Napoleon said, "Chandra asked if you'll want your electric cart driven over to Williams or if you'll walk back here. She said if you want it, call her—she's going to stay there and tidy up for a while."

"Thank you, Mr. Solo. I shall probably want it sent over. The width of the campus is quite a fair walk in one direction."

"It's nice to see you well, sir," said Illya.

"I'm feeling refreshed by my return to the academic world, Mr. Kuryakin—and the climate here seems to agree with me."

Napoleon started to say something almost involuntarily, but caught a fierce look from Illya and bit his tongue.

They wound along concrete walks past the gray-stone fortress of Converse Hall and came into a newer, larger Quad. Williams Hall, along with its neighbors, backed on its west side facing the older square where stately old trees shed their motley leaves on the deep green grass. Here, in contrast, patches of earth were still bare. The young saplings were scarcely free of their supports, and seemed hardly to know what to do with their foliage now that the weather was turning chill.

It was Illya, ever alert, who first observed the man in the dark suit following them. *Sotto voce,* he informed the other members of his party.

"The one in the ill-fitting brown suit?" asked Baldwin without turning round. "Is he wearing a blue-and-gray striped tie?"

"I can't tell at this distance," said Illya. "Friend of yours?"

"Hardly. My friends have better taste, as a rule. No, I suspected him of more than scholarly interest in my activities yesterday."

"I could let the rest of you go on ahead while I go back to talk to him," the Russian agent offered.

"That shouldn't be necessary, Mr. Kuryakin. Among my reasonable precautions I have established defensive systems about the campus." He scanned the horizon figuratively, then started off towards Williams Hall again. "Since the curious gentleman is still following us, I shall act on my suspicions." He raised his stick and hailed a hulking young man in a bright green-and-gold windbreaker.

They passed the time of day and exchanged opinions on the football team's chances for success in the impending season, while Illya and Napoleon shifted their weight from one foot to the other and exchanged murmurs with Waverly. Then Baldwin said, "By the way, Mr. Whalen, I have been hearing rumors about football spies from Crawford Academy. Have any of your friends mentioned this possibility?"

"Well, I did hear something about that..."

"I would discount those rumors, myself, but for the fact that the gentleman over there was standing near the practice field yesterday afternoon with binoculars and a notepad. I observed at the time that his tie bore Crawford's colors."

"You mean the guy in the brown?" Whalen glanced suspiciously over Baldwin's shoulder. "He doesn't look like he belongs around here. Wonder what he's looking for. Maybe I ought to go ask him. Thanks, Dr. Fraser."

Whalen nodded to the three UNCLE representatives and wandered off at a right angle to their path. Illya glanced at Baldwin. "You just launched a self-directing guided muscle from one of your defense systems, didn't you."

Baldwin looked pained. "Has it occurred to you, Mr. Kuraykin, that the longer Thrush believes we are ignorant of their surveillance, the better? I understand your thirst for physical action, but I beg you do not indulge it at the expense of my security."

Patiently they strode on towards Williams Hall, Illya watching their tail uneasily from the corner of his eye. They reached and turned the corner of the building just as half a dozen figures strode down another walk into the New Quad some distance away. Just around the corner Illya stopped and turned. The others paused and looked at him.

"Pardon me, sir," he said with a bit of a smile. "I'd like to watch."

He peeked around the corner, looking between the edges of the bricks. Surrounded by a fence of green-and-gold windbreakers, the man seemed a good deal smaller than he had alone in the middle of the Quad. He was fumbling for his wallet when Baldwin's voice drew Illya back.

"Mr. Kuryakin...would you care to join us? The bogey has been effectively neutralized."

Reluctantly, Illya left the view and followed as Baldwin continued. "A secondary reason for withholding your encounter is the problem of time. I have no reason to be hailed as a witness to a charge of unprovoked assault and battery—computer time is valuable, and we will need more than you might think."

"Frankly, sir, I was concerned for the safety of the campus vigilantes."

"Mr. Kuryakin, if you expect a low-level Thrush assigned to a simple surveillance task to whip out a gun and start shooting people, you must indeed underestimate us. He will have been supplied with a perfectly valid cover. All I ask is that he be detained long enough for us to move unobserved from my office to the computer facility." He shook his head. "The direct approach, young man, is not always the simplest. If you had confronted him, he might have become desperate."

"And besides," said Napoleon, "you'd gone to all the trouble of setting up the second string team for your personal swarm of bodyguards."

Baldwin paused and stared at him for a moment. "Of course. To leave it untested would have been a shame."

Chapter 7: "Good Is Better Than Evil Because It's Nicer."

From his office, Baldwin telephoned to another campus extension where he spoke with a Miss Potter. As he did so, Napoleon took the opportunity to introduce Illya to the cute dark-haired secretary, whose name was Lyn Stier. Without going into their shared history, Napoleon got the idea across that they were actually old friends of Dr. Fraser who hade come up to see him as a surprise. She laughed prettily and said, "I'll bet you know a lot about him."

"Not as much as we'd like," said Illya. "Perhaps we could exchange notes this evening."

"The dance? Why, I'd love to! Dr. Fraser..."

Baldwin turned to her as he hung up the telephone. "Miss Stier, I believe those notes can wait transcription a few more days. You may as well take the rest of the day off."

"Oh, thank you," she said, rising and straightening the piles of pages covered with scrawls and obscure formulae in the distinctive jagged handwriting and green ink. As Baldwin beckoned Waverly over for a muttered moment of conferral, Lyn smiled brightly at Illya. "Why don't you meet me there?" she said.

"Miss Stier," said Baldwin suddenly, "as long as you're leaving, could you give me a lift to the computer facility? My leg has been acting up since that lamentable occurrence in Philadelphia." He picked up a locked attache case and limped toward the door as Lyn got her coat. "Mr. Waverly, Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin," he said, "I shall expect to meet you later." He opened the door for Lyn and followed her out.

"He means, gentlemen," said Waverly dryly, "that we are to walk to the computer facility and meet him there." He eased himself into Baldwin's chair as Napoleon and Illya started for the door.

Solo stopped first and tapped his partner as he turned the knob, pointing back at Waverly, who was casually filling his pipe from Baldwin's humidor. Solo looked at him a moment, then glanced at Illya and sank into the seat recently vacated by Lyn. "My dear Watson," he said, "put yourself in Baldwin's place. That bogey won't stay neutralized forever, and he'll probably be sure all four of us went in here. If Baldwin gets out unnoticed and one of us is seen occasionally at the window he'll assume Baldwin is still here and maybe keep watching for hours and hours."

"Especially if we leave the light on," said Waverly through a cloud of poisonous smoke.

"So he'll hide in Lyn's car while she gets him past the stake-out," said Illya. "If he keeps ducking down, won't she begin to wonder?"

Napoleon glanced at Waverly, then back at Illya. "My dear Watson," he repeated, "since his leg is paining him severely, he'll want to stretch it out on the back seat where he can remain out of sight. Right?"

"Essentially, Mr. Solo," said Waverly. "Besides, we could do nothing at the computer facility until the data is ready to feed. Mr. Kuryakin, why don't you show yourself briefly at the window and see if anyone is watching?"

* * *

Miss Potter had brown hair and wore a light yellow suit over a neat plain blouse. As she worked over coding sheets with Baldwin, Napoleon observed that the top button was open. The first set of data had already been run when they arrived, unfollowed; the stake-out had studied them intently as they passed him with the width of the street separating them, and had chosen to remain where he thought his duty lay.

Napoleon spent his time chatting with Miss Potter, whose name was also Lin but spelled with an *i*. She said Dr. Fraser claimed to prefer it that way: "He doesn't have to worry about addressing me or his secretary by the wrong name, but anything he writes down will be sure to go where he wants it to." She smiled charmingly. "You'd almost think he'd planned it this way."

Solo shrugged. "I wouldn't put it past him."

"Neither would I," said Lin, as a chime sounded. "Oops, there's the second Games Theory program coming off now." She got to her feet and hurried to study the printout.

"Games Theory?" said Napoleon, coming up behind her to look over her shoulder.

"Uh-huh. The math department uses it sometimes, but Dr. Fraser is the only person from the chemistry department to utilize this particular capability. He says it has to do with studies of random interactions of molecules...You needn't mention this to him, but I'm afraid he's doing something else."

Napoleon swallowed. "What could he be doing?"

Lin lowered her voice as the machine-gun clatter stopped and the paper shot up to clear the tear-bar. "Several of the faculty have gotten involved in a complex kind of war game called Super-Diplomacy. I wouldn't be surprised if Dr. Fraser were playing in one, with the computer as his general staff."

"There is a large element of truth in what you say." Illya's soft Russian accents spoke from behind them as Miss Potter tore the wide sheet of paper from the machine. "What's the latest news from the front?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask Dr. Fraser. The coding language is one I'm not familiar with. I can pick out bits and pieces, but the overall direction is just a little beyond me. All I do is help him set it up."

Baldwin and Waverly entered together and joined the others at the large worktable. Baldwin studied the cryptic typed lines and made a few notes, while Napoleon looked over his shoulder and wondered about something.

"Ah, Dr. Fraser...it certainly is a lucky coincidence that your tapes happened to be in a format this machine could handle."

Baldwin smiled deep in his beard. "Yes. Isn't it."

"What language is it, anyway?" asked Illya idly.

"THROTL," said Baldwin succinctly. "THRush Operational Translating Language. It is distantly derived from Cobol, Fortran, Loglan and Berneckytran, among others, adapted for versatility. I regret I cannot share a direct translation of this sheet with you, but much of the material here is classified and I hope to return to my proper position shortly. Give me an hour alone with it and I will have our next move planned out."

Lin glanced at Napoleon significantly.

* * *

The dance had already begun when Illya poked Napoleon and pointed. Across the gymnasium, on one of a row of folding chairs, sat Irene Baldwin in a perfectly proper and fetching outfit. "She's here to tell Ward something," said the Russian. "And there are entirely too many secrets being kept around here these days. Let's see if we can intercept anything of general interest."

Solo nodded. Chandra and Lyn had drifted off together for a few minutes, and Alexander Waverly had drifted into contemplative silence. Lin Potter had bounced by with a short young man with tangled blond hair and black framed glasses, waved to them and called them to join, but Chandra had something important to tell Lyn and begged their patience for just five more minutes.

They had left Napoleon and Illya standing at the edge of the dance floor, hands clasped behind them, rocking forward occasionally, and conversing in tones just audible above the energetic but uninspired combo. Now they had stopped rocking, and were watching, with the utmost unconcern, the quietly smiling and nearly anonymous woman across the hall.

Finally Illya spoke. "Napoleon," he said, "I think I'll go and ask her for a dance."

Napoleon said nothing for a minute. "Sounds like a good idea," he said at last. "See what you can find out."

The next number was slower with a more definite rhythm, and Illya materialized beside Irene's chair, clicked his heels slightly and offered her his hand. Her eyes were warm as she accepted it and rose, and they turned out onto the floor.

Illya opened the conversation. "I must thank you for the bouquet," he said. "Chandra told us you were on our side."

"Chandra oversimplifies, I'm afraid. I just didn't want Ward to let things get worse. When the situation deteriorates, change it. As for the bouquet, I carried it with me when I went down to the City." She laughed lightly. "Ward always said you wouldn't recognize a clue if it was handed to you on a tray—I'm really pleased to find he was wrong."

Before Illya could think of an answer, she changed the subject and was asking him if he had seen any of Burlington since he'd been here.

"No—we came straight here from the airport."

"What a pity. If you have time, you should ask Ward to give you his ten-cent tour of the city."

"I remember how your fifty-cent tour of San Francisco ended."

"With poor Mr. Horne riding the California Street cable. Yes, that was an enjoyable evening. But I won't be able to come with you this time—Ward and I have agreed not to know each other at all while conditions are so unstable; I should actually be in hiding at the moment."

"Why did you come to the dance, then?"

She sighed. "Sentimental weakness, I suppose. And I did want to see Ward, if only from a distance. Chandra told me how well he looked at Convocation."

"I don't suppose you know what we can expect, where King is, or anything like that."

She shook her head. "Oh no. I just stay close enough that I can come help Ward if he needs me."

The music stopped and they joined the patter of applause as the floor cleared and the tempo changed. Irene stepped back hesitantly. "I probably shouldn't have been seen with you, Mr. Kuryakin. Thank you." And she was gone.

Chandra had kept Lyn occupied just long enough. The two girls emerged from an anonymous doorway seconds after Illya rejoined

Napoleon and Waverly. Lyn fastened herself to Illya and drew him back to the dance floor as the combo performed a vicious *molto accellerando*. Chandra sat next to Napoleon, who greeted her with a look of curiosity. "I don't suppose you're acquainted with Lyn."

"Only a nodding acquaintance—she's Ward's secretary. Where is Ward, anyway?"

"Still working over his computer outputs. But he called for his electric cart so he should be here shortly."

"Oh, look!" said Chandra suddenly. "There's Irene!"

Napoleon nodded. "Illya took a turn around the floor with her while you were out. She told him she'd just as soon not be noticed at all."

"I think you can understand her reasoning," said Baldwin softly behind them. "Her life as well as mine may be in danger. Waverly, I have prepared a set of notes which you will want to study. I need badly to sit down—if you will pardon me..."

He eased himself into a chair and straightened his leg. Chandra greeted him brightly, then seized Solo's arm. "Napoleon, let's dance."

As they stepped onto the floor, Chandra said, "Ward wants to talk to Mr. Waverly, and he really has walked quite enough for the day."

Napoleon started to object, but she said, "Oh, come on. If Mr. Waverly wants you to know something, he'll tell you. And remember what I told you about relaxing and enjoying yourself."

* * *

Sometime later there was an intermission. Under cover of the general clamor, Waverly told his two agents, "I shall fly back to New York tomorrow morning. There are a number of suggestions based on these results which warrant application at once. I would like the two of you to remain here." His gaze shifted. "You are extremely valuable to us, Dr. Fraser, and we would hate to have anything happen to you."

"So would I," said Lyn sincerely. "I think he's just fine."

Illya was paying only partial attention to the conversation. He was keeping at least one eye on Irene Baldwin most of the time, waiting for her to make some attempt to communicate with her husband. If they could get some idea of what the limping devil had in mind...

But Irene sat peacefully on the other side of the dance floor and never even made an attempt to catch Ward's eye. She watched the students milling about the floor and fiddled with her fan, opening and closing it, fluttering it up and down, occasionally touching her cheek or her lips with it, passing it idly from hand to hand.

From time to time Illya recognized one or two letters of the International Semaphore Code, but they seemed random and disconnected, and he berated himself mentally for seeing meaning where there was none.

Then the band struck up another number and both couples took to the floor. Baldwin and Waverly looked after them for some time before the Thrush said, over the racket, "My leg seems to be cooperating again, but the noise here is really more than I prefer to endure." Leaning heavily on his stick, he levered himself erect. "I shan't expect to see you for some time, but you might give additional thought to the other matter we were discussing. Tell Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin my residence at the Bomb Shop is quite adequately protected, but too small to accommodate anyone else. They had best stay at their hotel. I can call them if anything comes up." He bowed, turned, and stumped off to his electric cart.

Waverly checked across the room. Between the leaping forms of the dancers he could still identify Irene Baldwin, and when at last the music stopped and the rest of his party returned, he beckoned Napoleon and Illya to him.

"Baldwin has gone home to the Bomb Shop," he said. "He would prefer to have you on call—I would prefer to have you living in his hip pocket. Be outside his door at ten forty-five tomorrow morning—eight forty-five starting Monday—and stay with him. Mr. Kuryakin, were you able to interpret Irene's message to him?"

"Uh, message, sir?"

"Her signals with the fan. Surely you observed them."

"Well, I caught what looked like a few letters in International Semaphore, but nothing made any sense."

"International Semaphore is useful for filling vocabulary gaps, but the body of her communication was in the traditional flirting gestures with her fan. I recognize the maneuvers, but could not recall their meaning. The semaphore letters were initials, I believe; the flirting gestures were passing out of use when I was a lad, but I may be able to find something on them in our research files."

"Trust Baldwin to find something so old nobody else would know it," muttered Solo. "What else have you found out from him?"

"Several things," said Waverly musingly. "And not all of them have to do with the case in hand. Some of his implications will deserve intensive study at a later date. Until then, you will follow orders and keep your eyes and ears open." He dismissed them with a glance, and Solo looked around.

"Chandra and Lyn have disappeared again," he said, and Illya nodded.

"So has Irene," he said. "It's a disconcerting habit shared by Baldwin's friends."

Napoleon nodded. "Makes a fellow glad he's not a friend."

Chapter 8: "White Clover And Monkshood."

Monday they rose at the crack of dawn, and were on station when Baldwin stepped out of the Bomb Shop into the clear crisp morning. He greeted them without visible surprise and asked if they had had breakfast. They had, and in turn asked politely for permission to sit in on his lectures for the day.

Thus they began the academic round. Dr. Fraser handled only two lectures, Intermediate Organic and Advanced Inorganic. Within a few days, Napoleon somehow gravitated to the former and Illya to the latter—and both found themselves taking notes and discussing the lectures with Baldwin while they helped him around the lab.

The following Friday they were unconsciously beginning to relax after an uneventful week. Nobody had been following them, no attempts had been made on any of their lives, nothing suspicious had happened. And as far as the UNCLE agents could tell, Irene made no attempt to communicate with Ward Baldwin.

They followed him into his office precisely on the stroke of nine as they always did, and found Lyn already there as she usually was. The heat was on, the mail was stacked and ready, and a pot of water was balanced on the radiator. Not as usual, there was a bunch of flowers standing in a wide-mouthed 500-ml. erlenmeyer flask on her desk. Two tall blue flowers stood handsomely among a cluster of short white puffy blossoms.

Lyn looked up as they entered. "Oh, Illya!" she said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Illya. "What for?"

"Why, the flowers, of course. They're lovely!"

"I'm glad you like them," said Illya, "but I didn't send them."

She looked surprised. "But—who else?"

He shrugged. "You must have a secret admirer."

Baldwin had taken his seat at the desk by this time, and said, "Miss Stier, have you run off the test for the Organic class?"

"A test?" said Napoleon. "When?"

Baldwin stared at him. "Mr. Solo, you are not enrolled in my class- you are merely auditing."

"Well, I know, sir—but could I take a look at it?"

Baldwin snorted and returned to his mail as Lyn placed a stack of dittoed and stapled sheets beside him. He studied each item carefully and sorted them into three piles and the wastebasket. One colorful piece of heavy folded paper was bound for the trash when he caught himself and

looked consideringly at Napoleon Solo. He glanced down and tapped the thing in his palm, then spoke with sarcastic enthusiasm.

"Well! A weekend at a ski lodge! This is the nicest thing that's happened to me in the fifteen years I've been confined to this wheelchair! Mr. Solo..."

Napoleon looked up and reached forward as Baldwin extended what proved to be a gaudy brochure and a robotyped note, offering Dr. Fraser a free weekend at the Redwing Lodge. It included a veiled admission that there was no snow as yet, but emphasized the natural beauty and their own comforts and distractions.

"I can think," said Baldwin, "of a few things for which I have less desire or need than a weekend on a granite crag in the midst of the wilderness. However you, or Mr. Kuryakin, might want to take advantage of the offer; their unawareness of the most important fact about me would indicate that any reasonably competent-appearing male could stride up to their desk with this, identify himself confidently as Dr. Fraser, and move in. They will doubtless have a sleeping bag reserved in my name."

Napoleon leafed through the brochure, bearing in mind the axiom that an artistic rendering of a swimming pool meant they hoped to build one in the next few years. It looked like a nice enough place..."Illya?"

The Russian shrugged. "Why don't you take the weekend off—I'll plan to take next weekend."

Never one to haggle over a favor, Napoleon said, "Now, where is this place?"

* * *

They were alone briefly over lunch, and Illya took the opportunity to ask Napoleon if he'd noticed anything odd in Baldwin's reaction to Lyn's bouquet.

"Anything odd?" said Solo. "I don't think he reacted at all."

"When his secretary receives a bouquet centered around a couple of the most poisonous flowers in the pharmacopea? He's a chemist, and knows poisons—he would have made some remark."

"Those blue ones?"

"They're monkshood—chock full of aconite, which is a very neat, reasonably powerful and untraceable poison."

"What were the white ones? Poison ivy?"

"I think they were clover. But I think, all in all, it warrants being mentioned to Mr. Waverly. We're supposed to be taking note of everything around Baldwin, and anything odd is worth noticing."

Napoleon drew out his silver pen, opened it and extended the antenna. "Open Channel D," he said.

In a matter of seconds Alexander Waverly's gruff, familiar voice answered. Somewhat diffidently Solo described the bouquet and Illya's reason for noticing it, and found Waverly's reaction surprising.

"Excellent," he said. "I had been expecting something similar. I don't suppose you noticed any letters arriving with the postage stamp placed inconveniently? Or any re-mailed magazines or newspapers?"

"There have been several magazines, sir," said Solo, "but they were all in the wrappings of the publishers. Bearing in mind Baldwin's taste for traditional methods of covert communication, I was quite prepared to hold them up to the light and look for pinholes marking letters."

"Don't be so smug, Napoleon," muttered Illya. "I thought of that too."

"Very good, Mr. Solo," said Waverly. "Section Four has had no results from their search for data on the fan gestures, and I'm no longer confident of remembering them all in sequence."

"Sir," said Illya, "you think the monkshood and clover may mean something?"

"I am sure of it. I know the flower symbolism is in the file; we should have it shortly."

"While they're looking," Napoleon said, "sir, I'd like permission to take the weekend off. Illya is agreeable if he can have next weekend."

Waverly mumbled the question around for a moment before answering, "Baldwin doesn't seem to expect any overt action for at least six days—you may go, with the understanding that you will be on call constantly."

"Of course, sir. I'll only be an hour or two away."

Illya elbowed him. "Here comes Baldwin," he muttered. "Wrap it up."

"Baldwin's coming," Napoleon said. "Call us about the flowers." And with a flick of his fingers the slim silver pen was back in his pocket, his body turned to conceal the action.

* * *

Napoleon Solo had based his estimate of two hours on the map distance of fifty miles, and left Burlington after an early dinner with Illya and Lyn. He had not allowed for a sudden severe rainstorm and stone roadbeds. At two-thirty in the morning, eyes and arms aching from squinting through his rain-blinded windshield and fighting the steering wheel over progressively deteriorating roads, he turned the car into a parking lot with a few feeble lights, and dragged his suitcase out of the rear. He staggered exhausted and bleary-eyed into a lobby, roused a clerk by banging on a bell, dropped Dr.

Fraser's invitation on the desk, scrawled something in a register, stumbled up one flight of stairs, thanked somebody, drank a glass of water, stripped and collapsed.

And awakened at ten o'clock, flexed the kinks out of his muscles, and bounded from bed to face the glad day. He flung wide his window—the sky was incredibly clear and he could smell the woods.

After a shave and other social necessities were taken care of, the first item on the day's agenda must certainly be breakfast. Casually but impeccably outfitted, he descended the main stairs into the lounge at ten forty-five. It looked like a set for a ski lodge but that there were neither skis nor crutches in evidence this early in the season. Heavy beamed ceilings and tall windows surrounded half a dozen bright-looking young people displayed against a background of fur-and-leather furniture. One wall was fieldstone, and from it bulged a vast smouldering fireplace.

Above the fireplace, perhaps five feet by four, was a flattened, rounded, inverted triangle containing the stylized silhouette of a fierce bird in fighting posture, black on white, with the lifted wings in red.

Napoleon Solo closed his eyes and thought about what he'd seen for several seconds. But for the red wings it was a Thrush. When he opened his eyes again it was still there.

He sighed as breakfast vanished from the imminent present and receded to an indefinite future, turned neatly around at the foot of the stairs as if he'd just remembered something, and went quietly back up to his room. There he collected his thoughts and pulled out his transceiver. His voice was not quite one of desperation as he called, "Open Channel D!"

* * *

Downstairs the night clerk said, "That was him—that guy that came down the stairs, flashed on the bird and split back to his room."

"You're crazy! That was whatshisname from New York—we saw him in the last briefing. Remember? Besides, I heard Fraser was an old goat with a beard."

"Yeah? Well, he signed *Fraser* in the book. See?"

"Jeez, what a scrawl...Ha! I'll say he signed! Look at that. What does it say?"

"Uh...*Napoleon Fraser*..."

"You goop! That's Napoleon Solo—the name just clicked in. He's only about the biggest gun in UNCLE."

"Oh, UNCLE! *That* briefing. Yeah, I remember. Look, you better call Boston. All they've been saying has been '*Get Fraser*'. If this isn't Fraser, I

don't think we ought to do anything without checking. You're pretty sure about that identification?"

"Sure enough to call for an Emergency Override. Keep an eye on things while I get the satellite warmed up."

Three minutes passed, and the day manager came out of his office.

"What did they say?"

"They yelled a little bit about autonomy and taking responsibility for decisions—my father-in-law probably told them to tighten up on the operation here."

"And then they told you what to do?"

"Yeah. They said, '*Get Solo*'."

"Y'wanna put the Twins on him?"

"Why not? If he doesn't let the sign spook him, he'll go out this afternoon. He's probably checking through Diners Club and everybody now, and when we test clean he'll believe it."

"Yeah..."

Section III: "Let's Choose Executors..."

Chapter 9: "What's A Bozo Bill?"

Two hours before Napoleon Solo made his startling discovery, a pigeon fluttered through a small hatchway into a cage some fifty miles south-southwest. Her passage tripped a microswitch, causing a bell to chime and a flag to drop in the next room where Ward Baldwin, concealed from the world, sat most informally clad in a blue wool dressing gown and worn slippers over a bowl of steaming oatmeal, studying a chemical journal.

He looked up as the bell sounded in the back of the most private apartments behind the Bomb Shop, then rose painfully and reached for his stick. With its help he made his way back to the small corner where three pigeons were stalking about and murmuring to each other. One was pecking up grain in the end of a wire runway. Baldwin dropped a gate behind her, opened another gate and reached through.

Taking the bird gently between his hands he brought it out and held its plump underside to the light. There, fastened high up her leg, close under the body and safe from the airstream, was a small aluminum capsule. Carefully he unclipped it, cooing soothingly to the bird, and palmed it as he replaced the winged messenger in her cage.

Under better illumination in the next room he opened the capsule, and placed it in a tiny rack with four others after picking out the scrap of folded tissue paper it contained. Spread carefully on a worktable the neatly printed message was clearly legible. MEET ME BOZO BILL 2PM SAT. There was no signature and no need for one. Pigeon Post was still one of the most secure systems of communication in the world—all the more so for being out of style.

* * *

Illya met him at the door at precisely ten forty-five and accompanied him on his walk across campus. On the way they conversed casually on unimportant things, and at one point Baldwin asked the Russian agent if he were at all familiar with New England.

"Only Boston and points south. I've never had occasion to spend much time up here."

"It's lovely country," said the Thrush idly, and shifted into a local anecdote dating from the Revolutionary War. It lasted until they arrived at the office.

Lyn was just turning on the radiator when they came in. Baldwin greeted her cheerfully and said, "Could you find those notes I made last fortnight for tomorrow's address?"

"The seminar on Urban Pollution? Yes sir, I brought them out last week so they'd be ready when you wanted them. They're here someplace..." She sorted through piles of papers.

"Mr. Kuryakin," said Baldwin offhandedly, "would you be so good as to run down to the fountain and fill the teakettle? Thank you."

As Illya picked up the kettle and swung out the door, Baldwin turned to his desk. And as the door closed, he picked up the telephone.

* * *

It lacked five minutes of twelve when there was a light tap at the door and Chandra Reynolds, stylishly clad, walked in. Baldwin was disposing of correspondence, Lyn was typing his notes, and Illya was shamelessly reading *Spiderman*. He looked up and tucked it away as she came in.

"Hi, Ward!" she caroled. "Hi, Illya darling! It's lunchtime, and I *hate* to eat alone."

"Good morning, Chandra," said Baldwin. "It's not noon until the chimes ring. And I'm afraid I must have lunch sent in today and all distractions sent out. Some research has just been reported which will require a complete revision of my address for tomorrow."

"Oh dear—chained to your desk again. Illya, will you and Lyn come with me?"

"Golly, Mrs. Reynolds, I ordered a lunch along with Dr. Fraser."

Chandra looked appalled. "Well! Illya—don't tell me *you're* bound to be here all day too!"

"Good heavens, no," Baldwin growled. "Mr. Kuryakin, I have quite enough work to do that I am unlikely to leave my desk, let alone my office. I assure you that I am quite safe here, and your presence—if you will forgive me—is a distraction. Allow me an hour to organize my thoughts on the problem and then return if you must."

"Well..."

"Oh, *do* come with me, Illya! I'll show you the old part of town."

"I'd better not be gone more than an hour. After all, I am responsible..."

The twelve o'clock bell sounded, and Baldwin said "Lunchtime. Why not take the opportunity to get out of the office, Mr. Kuryakin? You probably feel cooped up in here."

"By the way," said Chandra. "Where's Napoleon?"

"He took the weekend off," said Illya.

"And left you here? Where did he go? You must tell me all about it over lunch," she said as Illya accepted his coat from Lyn and opened the door for

Chandra. Her cheery " 'Bye Ward," followed them out.

When they were gone, Baldwin turned to Lyn. "Miss Stier, you've lived in this area all your life. What is a '*Bozo Bill*'?"

"Bozo Bill? That's a statue in the town square over in Barre. My last boyfriend was from there. It's got a kind of bench around it that makes a whispering gallery so the people that sit at opposite ends can hear each other. We tried it one day. It was spooky."

Baldwin nodded. "It seems a peculiar name for a statue."

"Well, its real name is Youth Triumphant, or something like that. But it was put up during a big strike at the granite works and it was done by scab labor—they were called 'bozos'. And the workers called it *Bozo Bill* and the name stuck."

"I see," said Baldwin, and added another anecdote to his mental file. "And you said it was in Bury?"

"No, Barre. Like Goldwater. It's about forty miles east on Route Two, turn south just past Montpelier."

"Thank you, Miss Stier." Baldwin made a brief notation on a card, then stood. "If I'm not back by the time you have finished, you may close the office and go home. I believe everything is taken care of here."

"Close the office? But what about Illya?"

"Mr. Kuryakin will not be back this afternoon at all, my dear." He rose, took his stick, his hat, his gloves, his coat, his scarf, and his leave.

* * *

At approximately the same time, Napoleon Solo, sitting nervous and hungry in a comfortable room some fifty linear miles north-northeast, heard a metallic chirp and picked up his transceiver. "Solo here."

"We've checked out the Redwing Lodge, Mr. Solo—they're registered with the Hotel Association and the Diners Club. They just got started this year, with the backing of the Old Man of one of Boston's best families. As far as anyone can tell they have no connection with Thrush at all."

"Sure," said Napoleon. "They just happened to make up a Thrush insignia."

"Not necessarily. They could have seen it on that silly television show."

"Yeah, but..."

"Mr. Solo, all we can do is supply you with data. You're on the spot. We can't evaluate for you."

"That's not what I mean. Okay, just tell Mr. Waverly where I am. It may look all right from a distance, but it bothers me here."

"Very good, Mr. Solo." Section Four cut off.

So here he was. He had a free weekend coming, since no one had challenged him as Dr. Fraser, and it was forty miles of bad roads back to civilization...He wondered momentarily about selling the car and buying a cottage rather than facing the long drive out.

Still, he could just as well be on his guard for a while. It seemed an open-and-aboveboard sort of place, and if it was this new they wouldn't even have hidden TV cameras and booby traps wired in yet—considering it to be Thrush, and the more he thought about it the less likely it seemed. Besides, he was hungry, and he couldn't start back without breakfast *or* lunch. They'd be awfully unlikely to poison him in the dining room—at least intentionally. He folded his transceiver, gritted his teeth, girded his loins, and went out for breakfast.

Chapter 10: "Watch Out For That Tree!"

The clerk handed him a fluorescent orange windbreaker when he went to check out a horse, saying, "All the guests wear them, sir. You'll take a 44, I think."

Outside, he observed indeed many light nylon windbreakers of identical design in yellow, blue, green and even pink, all with the little black bird patch that apparently was the symbol of the lodge. Napoleon looked at his where it lay over his arm, and considered the moral and aesthetic implications for several seconds before reluctantly slipping it on. *If the boys at the office could see me now*, he thought, and double-timed out to the stables.

* * *

He'd always fancied himself on a horse, and Napoleon sat tall in the saddle as he wandered out onto the trails. They were clearly marked, and the horse knew his way home, the groom said—adding that the fluorescent jackets made guests easier to find when they got lost.

A couple of hours after this cheering piece of data, Napoleon Solo was walking his horse slowly along the Blue Trail. The paths were half-obliterated by fallen leaves from last night's storm, but rills ran down the edges and from time to time they passed larger freshets bounding down the mountainside, sometimes under the trail and sometimes across it. The air was cold and wet, and full of the sharp brown smell of rain-washed woods. Faded yellow and orange leaves cluttered the ground and stuck in bunches to the horse's hooves as he kicked through them, and blood-red and scarlet scattered before him.

Then the trees drew apart on either side of the trail, and they came out into a wide clearing carpeted with ankle deep grass a hundred yards to either side. Above and to his left, Big Jay Peak rose against the sky, dappled with shifting patterns of light and shade as the puffy clouds drew their shadows across the autumnal motley of red and yellow with startling patches still deep green. His mind at peace, Napoleon Solo felt at one with the silence of the mountains.

He and his horse, man and beast, away from the restraints of civilization, free of the last reminders...*except for this windbreaker*, he thought, glancing at the brilliant jacket. *I think it's brighter than any of the others I saw*. Even as he dismissed the matter, something was nagging at the back of his mind while his eyes refocussed on the mountainside beyond the meadow to his left.

The first thing he noticed was the way a few green trees stood out so against the yellow and orange. At the same time his memory held the picture of all the other nylon windbreakers around the lodge—and none of them had been orange. Two trains of thought meshed, and a highly developed paranoiac reflex set in.

I am pretty obvious, he thought as he prodded his stable-fed horse into a walk. *I not only stand out from the woods, I stand out from all the other guests. Oh help!*

He headed her around towards the edge of trees still close behind, and then heard something like a distant rumble of galloping hooves. He rose in his saddle and looked in both directions. There was a very large horse with a reasonably large man astride him lumbering directly towards him at a respectable rate of speed. The man wore a red lumberjack shirt and seemed to have something long and sharp resting in the crook of his arm with its business end pointed straight at the center of the nearest fluorescent orange nylon windbreaker. Napoleon yelled and kicked frantically at his horse.

In an unexpected fit of strength it kicked back and shook his left leg loose from the stirrup. Then it bolted for the woods after all as Napoleon locked his fingers on the reins and fought an urge to grab for the saddle-horn. He pulled up sharply to check the runaway and overdid it a little; the horse reared with a snort and writhed. Napoleon clamped his knees to the saddle and felt his loose left leg slip backwards; he leaned to grab the shaking neck and dropped the reins as he did so. As his horse twisted, Napoleon saw in a blurred moment the approaching horse shying away, and then his own mount hit the ground with all four feet and jolted the breath from his body. He clutched frantically for the reins, dangling just out of reach.

The horse kicked again and Napoleon felt his other foot slip from its stirrup. He had hardly time to kick twice in the hope of catching it again before the whole world came apart around him. There was a moment of utter weightlessness, and then a mountain hit him in the back.

His head cleared to a view of the sky. The horse was still snorting and stamping five feet away, and he tried to roll. Just as he started to wonder why he couldn't, the traitorous beast turned and galloped barebacked into the woods.

Napoleon looked down at his legs. They were still clamped to the saddle, with a partially unfolded blanket wrapped around his ankles. It began to look more and more like a conspiracy.

Hooves rumbled in the distance again as he sat up, and his head rang. *Here he comes again*, he thought with an odd resignation, and tried to unwrap his tangled legs.

He staggered to his feet facing the approaching horseman and pulled up the heavy horse blanket. The charging horse didn't swerve as the canter picked up to a gallop and the long solidly-couched lance never swerved off point. Napoleon's head ached fiercely as he stood, knees bent, with the blanket draped loosely from one arm like a useless shield.

He knew he had at least a couple of chances before the nut with his spear figured out what he was trying to do—unless his foot slipped and he got trampled or he misjudged something and got ripped in half before he managed to do it...But the horse was heading straight for him, looking as determined as a tank and just about as fast. He focused on the top of the lance, just ahead of the little pennon that fluttered there, and flexed his aching knees.

He feinted to the spear side just a moment early and the point followed. Then he leaped to the other side, throwing the rough woollen blanket out over the end of the spear and jerking frantically back as the horse's heaving flank brushed past his chest and knocked him away. Over the thunderous passage, he heard a *SPRUUNNNGGG!!!* and a vague cry.

Solo staggered to his feet and looked. The horse was galloping on, riderless. Eight feet away, a quivering aluminum pole beside him, lay a bulky man in a red flannel lumberjack shirt—a man who owed him at least a few civil answers.

The man was getting to his feet as Napoleon approached, in a half-crouched defensive posture, forearms crossed, that shows practice in La Savat. Napoleon paused and re-evaluated. He didn't seem to be ready to give civil answers, and Napoleon was becoming increasingly certain he knew most of them already. As he hesitated, the man charged, breaking his defense and grappling. Napoleon dodged from his grasp and grabbed an arm as it went by. Redshirt spun once endways and once sideways, and went slithering across the wet grass.

Napoleon jumped for him and caught a heavy boot just about the top of his left shoulder. He flopped heavily and rolled to his feet, facing his opponent, who dropped into his defensive position again, gripping his elbows, and sent a leather missile speeding at his face. Napoleon flinched back, and found himself falling as his legs were hooked from under him by a second kick. This time his attacker jumped for him. Solo, flat on his back, got his legs up in time and levered him right on over to land on his head a few feet further on.

Some moments passed, and silence descended again over the woods. Napoleon slowly and painfully gathered his feet under his center of gravity and pushed them down. When he was erect, he looked over to where the

other guy lay in a pile of arms and legs, just beginning to pull itself together.

"Now," he said, panting slightly, "will you answer a few simple questions or do I have to do it again?"

Something took him by both shoulders and turned him around. He found himself staring into the same face he had just dropped a man on, and the surprise slowed him down.

"You hurt my brother," said the face definitely.

Oh, Napoleon thought. *Twins*.

He was lifted and spun once, he thought later, but at the time a sort of fatalism overwhelmed him. He had just time to think irrationally, *I hope he's not triplets*, before a large portion of the state of Vermont hit him all over at once and everything else faded.

* * *

It was just about the same time of day when, forty-some miles to the south, Ward Baldwin, quietly but impeccably dressed, walked into the town square in Barre and paused to study the statue of Youth Triumphant. It squatted, or knelt, facing Burlington, holding a sword point down, at the westernmost tip of what might have been a town square but now was cut off as a traffic island. Around one hundred and eighty degrees behind it ran a stone bench with a high back curving slightly over the seat six feet above the ground. The back was a shallow compound curve, capable of gathering and focusing sound while keeping neither sun or breeze from anyone who chose to rest there. Both ends of the bench were empty.

Baldwin hobbled up to the southern end and sat. The white granite cube of the statue's base filled the center of the half-circle and he looked casually in several directions for Irene. He didn't see her approaching in the few minutes before the clock in the city hall tower sounded the hour of two, but as the last chime faded in the intermittent snarling of traffic, a voice murmured in his ear.

"You were early."

"Good afternoon, my love," said Baldwin, scarcely moving his lips. "You have discovered a fine meeting place."

"Thank you, Ward. I trust you were able to shake your watchdogs without trouble?"

"I sent Mr. Solo on a weekend in the mountains. I strongly suspect it of being a trap—for me, not for him."

"You think more highly of him than you admit."

"I have never questioned his survival instinct, my dear; merely his intelligence and taste. Chandra took Mr. Kuryakin to lunch."

"Bless her heart. She has a real talent for this work. I wish she would decide to come in professionally, but she keeps saying that it's too much fun to do for money."

"I received your bouquet with pleasure—and the pigeon, of course, arrived this morning."

"She must have gotten distracted. She was sent Thursday night."

"Could she have been intercepted?"

"Not without injury. I'm sure we're safe here for the time being, at least. But I wanted to know whether Alexander Waverly is acting on the advice you gave him."

"Yes. I heard an interim report—couched in the most guarded terms, of course—from him yesterday evening. Our misguided associates will be prevented from doing severe harm without actually suffering setbacks which could reflect adversely on us when this nonsense is resolved. But I was uncertain of my actions after you signaled me at the dance; did you mean that King is coming north or that Thrush Central is becoming increasingly militant? Or vice versa?"

"The fan gestures have the same problem as the flowers," Irene said. "Neither has a vocabulary quite suited to our purpose."

"All the better," said Baldwin seriously. "It forces us to think more deeply of what we are doing. I had no trouble following most of your meanings, in context."

"At the time I didn't know King was coming north," said Irene, "but Thursday I heard through Elma that King had told Central if they weren't able to keep you from cutting them up a bit at a time, he was going to Vermont with his PAR for a field demonstration."

"The Particle Accelerator Rifle? I believe Mr. Solo has referred to it as the *Scrooch Gun*?"

"That's right. Have you seen it? It's all coils and tubing, with fins around the barrel to dissipate the heat from the RF and magnetic coils in between. It looks like a hand-prop for Buck Rogers."

"I'm told it acts like one; the footage I examined was moderately impressive, as I recall..."

"Well, Central offered him an assault force for back-up, but he turned it down. He said he would prove his worthiness for the Council seat by taking care of you and Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin all by himself."

Baldwin released a sigh of pleasure and frank relief. "My dear," he said, "the man is an obvious monomaniac. And monomaniacs never take adequate precautions. He wishes to prove his worthiness? Very well. If he succeeds, he must be worthy. But if he is unworthy—we may close the books on Mr. King."

"He's a very convincing monomaniac," said Irene. "He gave Central one more chance to get you and they took it. There will be a fifteen-man undercover force hitting the UVM campus looking for you about a quarter past five on Monday afternoon."

"You know I would never question your sources, my dear," said Baldwin after a respectful pause, "but are you certain of that?"

"Unimpeachable, my love," said Irene. "But I must admit I am rather proud of it."

"The Computer indicated the likelihood of such an attack, but it predicted a smaller force, optimized at four-point-seven men in an early morning attack Thursday."

"Insufficient data."

"Of course. King's pressure. My campus defense forces will be quite able to take care of this group; an undercover assault force will not be prepared to commit actual mayhem upon uninvolved persons, especially large numbers of them. None of my personal staff should have to lift a finger—and we will probably have very good seats for the show."

"Don't be overconfident, my dear," said Irene. "If a covert force fails, they could still send in an overt one before giving King final permission to take the field." She paused. "Pigeon post isn't fast enough. I'll use the flowers. I can telephone and telegraph a bouquet to precise specifications overnight. I will have the Mercedes standing by if you find the situation a little too hot for you."

"Now, Irene..."

"Adequate precautions include admitting you may lose, dear. You taught me that, and it saved both our lives in Burbank. The Mercedes is in perfect condition and adequately close."

"You are quite right, my love."

The chimes just up the hill sounded the quarter. "We mustn't stay any longer," said Irene. "Goodbye, Ward. Do be careful."

"Of course, Irene. And you as well."

A slight rustling was his only answer, and traffic roared around the little island of silence for several seconds before he rose and walked slowly back in the direction from which he had come.

* * *

Napoleon Solo became aware of things bouncing around and something soft under him. He began sorting out sensory impressions even before opening his eyes to check and decided he was in a car, going downhill on a reasonably good but twisting road. A seatbelt held him in place, and he was wearing his own coat.

He looked blearily around to the right and saw the beginnings of a sunset behind the nearby hills; he looked left and saw Chandra Reynolds at the wheel. "Uh," he said, uncertain of what else to say.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," she said brightly without taking her eyes off the road. "How do you feel?"

"Like a used football. Do you know what happened?"

"Those were the Twins. They were sent out to get you. Fortunately I came along and explained things to them in time; they'll make up a story of some kind to tell the manager. I think they're his cousins or something."

"Oh." He thought for a while. "Are you part of Thrush?"

"Certainly not. They do too many things I don't approve of. But Ward is like a father to me. Naturally I want to know what goes on around him."

"I appreciate that. But how did you know what was going to happen to me?"

"Well, I didn't exactly. But I knew you were in trouble, and I thought I should help you for Ward's sake."

"Thanks anyway. But how did you even know I was in trouble?"

"Oh—I'm a witch. Irene is too. She taught me."

Napoleon smiled, and somehow she caught it though she never took her eyes from the road.

"We are," she said seriously. "You know Ward's physical condition—how do you think he's survived so well all these years?"

Napoleon didn't want to hazard a guess.

"There are all different kinds of witches, Mr. Solo. You might pick up a book called *Conjure Wife*, by Fritz Leiber. I know Fritz—he's a marvellously talented warlock himself."

Napoleon felt the desperate need to change the subject—this one was making his head ache even more. "Uh—where's Ed?" he asked.

Chandra's bright laugh tinkled over the noise of the car. "Oh, he can take care of himself. In case you're wondering, your suitcase is repacked and in the back of the car—it includes the stationery from the dresser drawer and a bath towel with the lodge emblem done in needlework."

"You should have gotten an ashtray, too," said Napoleon. "I think I would have liked one of them."

"Look in the glove compartment," she said. "I got two, but you can have one of them."

"Thank you," said Napoleon weakly and sagged back into the seat as a wave of exhaustion swept over him and bore him down into sleep.

Chapter 11: "I'm Glad They're On *Our* Side!"

Dr. Fraser found opportunity to converse with several of his students on Sunday, and with several more on Monday morning. Napoleon and Illya stayed quietly in the background, wondering at Baldwin's sudden sociability and exchanging sketchy notes on their weekends.

"I'm not really sure what happened Saturday," Illya said. "I'd rather not go into it for a while."

"I have much the same feeling," admitted Napoleon. "At least you didn't get anything broken."

"Well, not exactly," said Illya. "What happened to you, anyway? You look as if you went four rounds with a tree and lost."

"It was very confusing," Napoleon said. "Let me think about it for a few weeks."

The Russian nodded. They were alone over lunch when their communicators signaled. Napoleon's mouth was full—he flapped a hand at Illya, who answered the call.

"Kuryakin here."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Kuryakin," said Waverly's familiar voice. "The information has been found. According to the inexhaustible knowledge of Section Four, monkshood means *danger is near*; white clover means *think of me*. It could mean she will be standing by to help him."

"Uh, we knew that, sir," said Napoleon, having swallowed. "Chandra told us. You were there."

"Of course, Mr. Solo. But she might have wanted to remind him, or to specify that an attack was expected. Is all well?"

"It's been quiet all weekend, sir, and nothing has happened today."

"Very well. See that nothing does. Waverly out."

Illya replaced the little transceiver as Napoleon said, "You didn't mention anything about Baldwin getting away from us for a few hours."

"No—I imagine he saw Irene during that time, and that shouldn't be any of our business. He's still all right, isn't he?"

Napoleon had to agree that he was.

* * *

Shortly past five o'clock Baldwin turned from his desk and addressed the three other residents in his cramped office. "I feel you all should know that it will be relatively unsafe for any of us to venture out of this office for the next hour or two."

Napoleon and Illya looked up from their homework; Lyn stopped checking tests.

"Miss Stier, do you know where Mr. Whalen would be now?"

"I think he's out at the practice field, but he might be at the Delta Sigma Chi house."

"Do you remember that telephone call we discussed?"

"Oh, yes sir. Do you mean..."

"Yes. The time has come to make the call."

Both Napoleon and Illya started to say something, then paused in deference to the other. In that moment of silence, Baldwin fixed them with a raised forefinger which said patience as Lyn lifted the phone and dialed.

"Hi, Billy—this is Lyn. Is Ed there?...Well, if somebody goes out that way, could you send a message? Some guys who said they were from Crawford called and said they'd found out how Dr. Fraser had been mixed up in that business a couple weeks ago—remember? And if he wanted to be one of the boys he was going to get the same thing, and pretty soon...Uh-huh. That's what I thought. Okay. Thanks, Billy. 'Bye.

"Was that right, Dr. Fraser?"

"A little overdone, my dear, but perfectly believable."

This time Napoleon spoke first. "Dr. Fraser, would you mind just a few words of explanation?"

"Not at all, Mr. Solo. Go ahead."

Napoleon bit his tongue and looked helplessly at his partner. Illya coughed.

"Sir," said Illya, "please—what's going on?"

"I am about to teach a group of men respect for both an elder and a younger generation," said Baldwin. He picked a set of powerful binoculars from the lower drawer of his desk and slipped off the lens caps. "And hardly any further action will be required of us."

"You're using innocent bystanders for your first line of defense!" said Illya in dawning realization. "How did you ever..."

"They feel they owe me a favor," said Baldwin simply, and focused his binoculars out the window, elbows braced on the sill.

"For 'that business a couple weeks ago'," said Napoleon. "What did you do for them? Blow up a police station?"

"Makes you homesick for Ireland, doesn't it," added Illya.

"Mr. Kuryakin, let us say I conducted a few badly needed extracurricular practical seminars. Vermont was the home of one of the first

guerilla forces in the world, and it seemed a shame to lose such a fine native tradition."

Illya looked blankly at Napoleon and then at Lyn.

"He means the Green Mountain Boys," she said. "They were sort of our Viet Cong in the Revolutionary War..."

Baldwin spoke smoothly across her explanation without taking his eyes from the binoculars. "Miss Stier, politics has no place here. Would you please telephone Mr. Whalen? Tell him that the bogeys are all dressed in gray sweaters and blue shirts and there are..."

Napoleon and Illya rose as one and looked over his shoulder as Lyn dialed. Across the Old Quad they could see three plain black cars just pulling up in a row. All twelve doors popped open and tiny figures piled out.

"... about two dozen of them."

"Oh, Ed, I'm glad I caught you. There's twenty-five or thirty of them...uh-huh, right!...and they're wearing gray sweaters and blue shirts. They're in the Old Quad right now...Good. We'll be ready."

Illya and Napoleon looked at each other and sat back down as Baldwin lowered the binoculars and turned around. "Miss Stier, how many did you say there were?"

"Well, I thought if they thought there were more, they'd be careful or bring more people..."

"Miss Stier, I had already allowed for that factor. There are, in fact, fifteen. If matters ever devolve to a body count, the discrepancy may be noted."

"Oh, come on," said Napoleon. "Who'll remember the number by the time they get here?" He stood up again. "I'm not really quite sure what's happening, but I think it'll be fun. And I want to watch."

Out on the lawn in the gathering twilight an uncertain number of gray-sweatered figures slipped along the walks and among the trees, approaching Williams Hall.

"Mr. Kuryakin," said Baldwin, lifting the binoculars again, "I have no wish to be distracted by you pacing this office behind my back like a caged tiger because you are denied action. In the closet you will find a team jacket in your size. Mr. Solo, there is one for you as well if you wish to join him."

"In other words," said Illya, "the uniform of the defending forces. I heard about these things going on in American colleges, but I never really believed it."

"Don't worry," said Napoleon. "There are very few casualties. I happen to be a veteran of a few myself, and would be glad to show it to you as it progresses."

"You must tell us sometime just what you did to Crawford," said Illya over his shoulder as Napoleon led him to the coffin-sized closet and sorted out two green-and-gold jackets. Baldwin didn't answer. Lyn said, "Oh, *do* be careful," as they left, and shifted her chair over to the window next to Dr. Fraser. From the second floor front they had a perfect view.

Napoleon and Illya took the steps three at a time and then paused between the inner and outer double doors on the sheltered stairs. "Where are the forces we are to join?" Illya asked doubtfully.

Napoleon took a quick look outside and saw two gray ghosts disappear behind trees. He eased the door open and looked to either side. "Come on," he hissed. "Quick. And act casual."

As he spoke he pushed the door open wide and sauntered candidly down the next dozen steps, Illya flanking a few feet behind him and to the left. Out from between the other buildings on either side other green-and-gold jackets were wandering, idly bent on no particular business and all aimed for the center of the Quad.

It was an eerie moment, and both sides doubtless felt it. In tense silence the scattered bright jackets began to move together, and in a moment one of the gray shadows pulled away from a tree and gave ground. At exactly that moment the entire left flank shattered.

A dozen or so charged forward and something white flew ahead of them like a snowball. It burst on a tree and a cloud of white billowed out. "Flour grenade," said Napoleon. "It confuses your enemy." Illya nodded. Several more flew as the skirmish line reached the edge of the Quad, and white patches began to appear among the fleeing Thrush forces. They paused once to regroup and started towards their cars, but another line of green-and-gold jackets stood there and now started forward. The little knot of gray-sweatered figures huddled for a moment, then headed in apparent disarray directly towards the steps where Napoleon and Illya stood.

Illya braced for a defense as he saw more bright jackets hurrying to his aid from either side—and Napoleon broke and ducked back through the doors to safety. For ten seconds Illya wondered dazedly if his partner had lost his nerve, then Solo kicked open the door and emerged with something cradled in his arms. "Here's a good one," he said to Illya as the first four Thrushies reached the bottom steps. "*Watch out!*" he yelled to the world at large, and twisted something.

There was a quivering and a belching sound from the thing he held, and something writhed and snapped rigid behind him. Ten feet away the leading

attacker was suddenly hit square in the chest with a frothing white rod just over an inch in diameter. He staggered, which can be fatal while going up stairs, lost his balance and was bowled over backwards, twisting to roll onto his shoulder as he fell.

Napoleon swung the fire hose, yelling something Illya couldn't quite follow, and swept eight more Thrushes and two University men off the stone steps like so many beetles. They scrabbled around regaining their equilibrium and occasionally swinging at each other.

The second wave of Thrushes never hit. They scattered towards every point of the compass but east. The rest of the green-and-gold jackets spread like a defensive outfield—which many of them were—and started to make interceptions.

The battle was now fairly joined. The western line moved forward from the cars in open formation, and gray shadows ducked between them. One reached a car and tore the door open, grabbing inside. He was just turning around when something slapped the side of his head and knocked him sideways. An instant later a string of tiny bright flashes in the dusk sparkled around him and the patter of small firecrackers echoed across the Quad. The Thrush straightened up, fumbling around his head, which was now a dazzling blue, as was the top of his sweater.

Napoleon said, "Ever heard of a water bomb? A water-filled balloon or paper sack designed to burst on impact."

"It works as well or better with Analine dyes," Illya observed.

"Uh-huh."

Four or five bright jackets moved in on the car, and two of them knelt briefly beside it. Napoleon and Illya dove straight down into the midst of the confusion in the middle of the Quad and were caught up in it. A flying body hit Napoleon about the knees and he folded over into the midst of several tussling figures. He was thankful he wore the uniform of the majority as three or four arms pulled him back to his feet and he looked around for Illya.

Somebody grabbed his shoulder and he spun around with his guard up and a fist cocked. Something wet and slippery filled his face and stung his eyes, and he swung his hands blindly rubbing to clear them. As he was blinking and doubling over defensively, somebody knocked him down again, but by then he was almost able to see and recognized the sharp sticky sweet smell of shaving cream.

He rolled away, wiping his sleeves across his face. The shaving bomb lay among the fighters now, its valve broken off and top blown free, spinning and spitting gobs of white lather in every direction. Both sides

were slipping on the soapy grass and the cement sidewalk was little better—as in another second two more bombs landed almost simultaneously, spreading their foam in widening circles of chaos.

Illya ran up to him, face smeared. "I think this is what they would call a riot now?"

"Only a newspaper would call it that," said Napoleon, catching his breath. "This is just a little horseplay."

"I wonder what Baldwin did to inspire such loyalty?"

"He'll have to tell us eventu...Look out!"

Two club-swinging Thrushes charged from the throng towards them. Illya whirled and ducked, catching the first just below his center of gravity with a braced forearm to help him over. The other jumped aside to avoid going the same route, but slipped on a patch of shaving lather. His arms windmilled frantically as his feet skidded diagonally out from under him and he seemed to fly under his own power for almost six feet until he crashed face down at the unmoving feet of Napoleon Solo.

He looked down at Illya and said, "Why do you always do it the hard way?"

Some more of the Thrushes had made it back to their cars, and were struggling to get into them as more paint bombs burst on and around them. Suddenly motors roared up the next street and tires squealed around the corner into the campus. Five cars painted in gaudy colors swung into the Quad and thundered across the street. Heads and arms stuck out the windows waving beer bottles and banners and yelling. The doors burst open on all sides even before the cars were stopped, and at least two dozen howling collegians tumbled out and leaped into the melee.

Instinctively Napoleon and Illya faded back towards Williams Hall. As they did, the Russian asked, "Who are *they*?"

"I'm not sure," said Napoleon. "What color uniform are they wearing?"

"Would you believe blue and red?"

"Another precinct heard from," Napoleon sighed. "Do you want to get back into that donnybrook or retire to Baldwin's box seats?"

"Depends on who's winning," said Illya reasonably. "How is our side doing at the moment?"

"Who can tell?"

They moved to the fringes of the battle zone to see what was going on. Something spattered and hissed, and somebody swore. There were cries of *Get That Guy!!* and three or four people pounced on somebody else. Napoleon and Illya moved forward to investigate. Solo was tackled by

somebody in a green-and-gold jacket whose eyes were clenched tight; he went down and yelled at him as he tried to pry him loose. The arms slacked and he forced a bloodshot eye open. "Sorry, fellas," he said. "Those *qualified nouns* got some spray stuff that fights dirty. Lemme give y'a hand —we'll take 'em out."

They helped each other to their feet and looked for the center of the brawl. Illya was over there, naturally, matching kicks and grabs with a wide-eyed Japanese boy in a red-and-blue jacket with a Frosh beanie. They both feinted and blocked in practised form, and the Freshman made a grab. Illya swung lightly to the side and almost caught his shoulders, then spun to jump for him as he landed. He charged forward, but the other had found his balance already and caught Illya's forearm as he went by. The Russian agent described a neat double somersault and landed on his back, arms out. Napoleon bent beside him and helped him up as his erstwhile partner ran on to join the action.

"That son of a gun is good," Illya gasped, getting to his feet and looking around for the little frat man who had thrown him so neatly. "You could have given me a hand," he said accusingly.

"You looked like you were having fun," said Napoleon, "and I didn't want to butt in until there was somebody for me. By the time you stopped looking as if you were having fun, it was too late."

"I'm sorry I asked. What kept you?"

They both leaped sideways as a knot of arms and legs wrapped in gray, gold and red tumbled by, threatening to destroy everything in its path. A fat, obviously heavy spheroid rolled across the grass, fallen from some courageous hand. Illya picked it up and studied it as Napoleon jumped to join him and pull him out of the way of a shower of water as somebody got the fire hose on the steps of Williams Hall into operation again. "Napoleon...*oof!* Sorry—Napoleon, what's this? One of those balloon things?"

"Right. You found it; it's yours to do with as you will. Just remember it's not a rigid body when you throw it, and allow for the inertia. Underhand is better."

"Think I could reach Baldwin's window?"

"Don't even contemplate it. He's probably watching with his binoculars at this very moment, and if we did anything along the lines of further escalation of hostilities he'd only give us a hard time after the war. But on the other hand he expects us to do our part out here."

"I see." Illya looked from behind the tree sheltering him from the capricious drops of the thrashing fire hose, now writhing untended across

the steps of Williams Hall and showering the entire Quad with chilly water. Suddenly another sound became audible over the racket of the battle.

Sirens wailed around the corner into the campus and two police cars squealed to either end of the Quad. One braked to the curb just fifteen feet from where Illya and Napoleon stood behind trees, trying to be thin.

An amplified voice thundered across the Quad. "*All right, break it up—break it up. If you clear away now you can go free. In about one minute we'll start making arrests.*"

From the center of the square came two Thrushes at a dead run straight for the near patrol car. Illya froze in the shadows as they whipped by him, then swung out and sent the fat quivering balloon sailing through the air towards them. Unhappily, he misjudged its weight. It arced just over their heads and burst on the top of the police car door, splattering the top, sides, hood and upholstery with a brilliant and runny blue dye.

Illya nearly choked, and looked to see if anyone had connected him with the dye bomb—only Napoleon was staring at him with an absolutely shattered expression. The two policemen grabbed the pair of charging Thrushes and instantly connected them with the desecration of their official vehicle. In record time they were handcuffed and slung into the back seat. By then Napoleon and Illya were halfway up the fire escape at the north end of Williams Hall.

As they pushed in through the door at the end of the second floor hallway, Napoleon found breath to speak. "Illya," he said. "I'm amazed at you. Throwing a paint bomb at a police car. It's your revolutionary heritage coming to the fore."

"It was purely accidental," said Illya with a touch of asperity. "And you know I didn't mean to hit that police car—I was aiming at the other two and overshot."

"Oh, *I* believe you," said Napoleon. "Thousands wouldn't. I only wonder whether Baldwin will."

Illya paled visibly. "He couldn't have noticed. It's nearly dark out there."

"Those were 7x50 binoculars; great for night seeing. And he has a tendency to notice everything."

"Uh, Napoleon—if he didn't notice, you wouldn't tell him."

"Well, after all..."

"I know a few things about you, Napoleon," said Illya uneasily.

"After all, as I was about to say, there's certainly no reason why he ever should."

Illya nodded, relieved. "Let's go back to the box seat and see what the stage crew has done towards sweeping up after the evening's entertainment."

Chapter 12: "Nineteen Sweetpeas And One White Rose."

If Baldwin had observed Illya's penultimate action, he made no mention of it. He had little commentary to make on the defensive battle other than to admit the results were wholly satisfactory. Two arrests had been made—both witnessed by the two UNCLE agents, and for which Illya may have deserved some glory had he not been unwilling to admit his whole share in the business.

All the student participants had escaped by their own routes, and the unnumbered strangers who had whooped in and found more fun than they'd bargained for had vanished back into the night. The police were remaining officially silent on the two Thrushes they had arrested, but it was a safe bet that both were out on some legal pretext in a matter of hours with unimpeachable voices vouching for them and a slap on the wrist from Central when they got home.

The next three days passed in perfect silence except for an occasional remark from Napoleon, whose left ankle had been tightly bandaged to ease a strain he hadn't noticed until he sat down after their retreat to Baldwin's office.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday held the usual round of classes and lab work, with dinner Wednesday in the company of Ed and Chandra. Friday morning started in the same groove, but Lyn had a new bouquet on her desk when they entered the office. Baldwin paused to examine it while Napoleon elbowed Illya.

"Aesthetically, that's a lousy arrangement," he muttered. "The white one in the middle is a rose, but what are those pink things around it?"

"Sweetpeas," said Illya. "I think. Do you want me to sneak out and check with Mr. Waverly?"

"You think it's another coded message?"

"Miss Stier," said Baldwin, "would you please place a telephone call to Dr. Berg and another to Dr. Carter? Simply tell them that their most generously volunteered assistance will be required for the next two weeks. And then, please, separate and order my lecture notes for the same period."

Illya spoke up. "Arranging for substitute lecturers? Are we planning on leaving unexpectedly?"

"No, Mr. Kuryakin. Nor immediately, nor suddenly. But possibly as soon as this evening."

"Golly, Dr. Fraser," said Lyn. "Is there going to be more trouble?"

"Not if we leave this evening," said Baldwin. "You need not concern yourself with it—but I will wish you to continue coming into the office

daily and keeping my correspondence in order. I expect to be back well within the fortnight specified."

"I'd be glad to come in every day for the whole semester."

"You needn't. If I have not returned by Monday the fourteenth you are to tender my most sincere apologies to Drs. Berg and Carter, order all my papers and the contents of my desk, and send them to Mr. Alexander Waverly at an address which I shall give you."

Illya elbowed Napoleon and muttered, "In answer to your last question, I would not only say it was another code message, I'd even go so far as to say it told him to get ready to go tonight."

Solo nodded, and a few moments later, as Baldwin bent over some papers and Lyn dialed the telephone, he slipped quietly out. Morning classes were already in session, and sweatered students, some in rubber lab aprons, hurried up and down the hall. From one direction equipment hummed intermittently; from another lecturing voices droned through the steam-heated air of the corridors. He found a corner where he could sit and talk to his pen without attracting undue attention, and called New York.

Waverly stalled him for nearly a minute while recovering the data on floral interpretation from Section Four. "Hem," he said finally. "I think you have divined the meaning adequately already. You expect, of course, taking into account what you've heard from Mrs. Reynolds, that Irene will be coming sometime this evening to pick up Baldwin and convey him to a place of hiding."

"The flowers say all that?"

"If you know how to read them. Sweetpeas mean *departure*, Mr. Solo. The meaning of the white rose is said to be, quote, *I am worthy of you*. How many sweetpeas did you say?"

"Nineteen, sir."

"An odd number. I would suggest you expect hostilities to commence near seven o'clock this evening."

"Nineteen hundred hours, in other words."

"Precisely, Mr. Solo. If nothing happens until the nineteenth of October, I shall be very surprised."

"Especially since Baldwin expects to be back before then. I'll get in touch with you when I know a little more. Solo out."

* * *

After his three o'clock class, Baldwin gave Lyn the rest of the afternoon off—she seemed worried and wished him good luck—and returned to the Bomb Shop with his team of bodyguards. There he busied himself packing

a few personal items while Solo and Kuryakin sat in the front room and fidgeted.

At five thirty he re-entered the comfortable sitting room and said, "Irene may arrive shortly; would you do me the favor of meeting her at the office? I have only a few more things to do here. And would you please carry this bag there for me? Thank you."

Solo took the small Gladstone and started for the door; Illya didn't rise. "You can handle that by yourself," he said as Baldwin left the room and the door closed solidly behind him. "Besides, I wonder if he might not be trying to split us up again. Mr. Waverly said nineteen hundred hours was the most likely time, and it's only half past seventeen."

"Well, let's check his marker," Napoleon suggested, hefting the bag. "It'll only take a minute."

The lock surrendered to a few seconds' work with one of Illya's patented pocket tools and the bag opened. On top of a blue-and-white striped flannel nightshirt with matching nightcap was an antique-gold-framed portrait of Irene. Napoleon looked at Illya and closed the bag. "He wouldn't leave this," he said. "Not with her picture in it."

"And not where anyone could find that nightshirt," said Illya. "You go ahead—I'll stick around here in case anything comes up prematurely."

Napoleon had been gone less than ten minutes when Baldwin came back into the sitting room. "Mr. Kuryakin, I've found I neglected to give Mr. Solo the key to my office, and Miss Stier will surely have gone home by this time. I have only a few minutes work left here, and shall follow you directly."

Illya rose reluctantly. "I shouldn't leave you alone if there's likely to be trouble, sir!" he said.

"Nonsense! I've been taking quite adequate care of myself for almost twice the length of your life. Here, take the key. The longer you delay the more likely Mr. Solo is to come back and you'll miss him in transit. I have no wish to spend the next two hours playing end man in an inane sequence from some French period farce."

"Look," said Illya, "sir. I'll leave my communicator with you. If anything happens you can call Napoleon; if I'm with him I'll hear the call." He slipped the little device out of his shirt pocket. "You turn the top like this to open the antenna, and push this little..."

"Mr. Kuryakin, I am intimately familiar with the operation of your transceivers. Very well—if it will ease your mind I shall keep it with me until I am able to join you." He accepted the communicator and clipped it

somewhere inside his vest. Then he re-extended the key to Illya. "Now will you please take this key to Mr. Solo?"

Illya gave his heels a smart click. "Directly, sir," he said, wheeled crisply and marched out the door. Baldwin looked after him a moment, shaking his head slowly.

* * *

The mutter of muffled motors behind the Bomb Shop came faintly to Baldwin's ears less than an hour after he had dispatched Mr. Kuryakin. Twice in that interval he had answered inquiring calls from the two UNCLE agents; the second time he had said, "Mr. Solo, is there any way by which this unit may effectively be left off the hook? I have few things left to do, truly, but with your calling every five minutes to enquire after my health, it is taking me twice as long as it should. Please believe that I will call should any difficulties arise, and practice the virtue of patience." He slapped the little aerial back into its socket and resumed his time-killing perusal of a technical journal which was scheduled to be thrown out.

Now he looked up at the distant sound of heavy engines starting, and saw that two small lights on a wall panel were flickering inconspicuously. He rose, collected his stick, his overcoat and his hat, and picked up his smaller briefcase. Judging from the racket and the vibration he could feel clearly through the cement floor slab, they had brought in air-hammers to get through the back wall. He smiled. They would find there was a reason for its double protection. Two other lights on the panel flashed brightly and a muffled explosion shook the inner door as Baldwin closed the outer and stepped into a clear frosty evening.

A tarpaulin was draped loosely over his electric cart beside the door; he twitched it aside and got painfully in. A great hue and cry was going up around the rear of the Bomb Shop as he hummed quietly away into the gathering dusk, and flames were beginning to lick up through clouds of dense gray smoke. The noise had drawn away the men detailed to guard the front, and the damage to his laboratory should be minimal; the area that had exploded was shielded by steel and stone from his research facilities, and even before he hummed around the next corner out of sight he could see the flames shrinking amid clouds of steam as the automatic sprinkler system did its work.

Once around the corner he switched his single headlamp on and pushed his cart to top speed. Fire sirens wailed by one street away, going the way he had come.

He zipped into the shadow of the steps before Williams Hall, extinguished the light and climbed awkwardly out of the wide seat.

Briefcase firmly in hand, bracing himself on his stick, he made his way up the outer stairs and the inner stairs to the entry hall. Twenty-six shallow steps to climb up to the second floor, with two landings; he was up them in a little over a minute.

Napoleon and Illya were both resting with their feet up as Baldwin opened the door and said, "Gentlemen, I am here. Please don't take too much longer."

Both of them were on their feet before he finished speaking, and Illya had the Gladstone bag in his fist. "Ready any time you are," he said.

"Very good. We have one more stop to make, and then we must be on our way."

Another flight of steps led to the third floor, and Baldwin was able to negotiate them with little difficulty. "The zoology lab will be deserted," said Napoleon. "Are we going down the fire escape or hiding on the roof?"

"Do be quiet, Mr. Solo," said Baldwin. "This will take less than a moment."

Just around the corner from the head of the stairs stood an old white refrigerator, humming quietly to itself. A neatly lettered sign taped to the door said, CAUTION—LIVE VENOMOUS REPTILES.

Baldwin opened the door, rummaged around in the freezing compartment for a moment and withdrew a small cardboard box. "Spare gas charges for my stick," he explained briefly as they descended the stairs. "They keep best at low temperatures."

Napoleon thought a minute. "What about the sign on the door," he asked. "What's really in there?"

"Live venomous reptiles," said Baldwin simply. "They're torpid at that temperature, and don't need to be tended. Perfectly safe."

"Unless someone leaves the door open," said Illya.

"The door," said Baldwin, "is balanced to close itself."

They got to the dim main floor hall as the clock ticked over to 6:57. The street outside was empty. "We heard some sirens go by," Illya commented. "Just before you came in."

"I believe they were answering a fire alarm, Mr. Kuryakin," said Baldwin.

"At the Bomb Shop?"

"I fear so—but the damage will be light and easily repaired."

"If you ever come back."

A huge car pulled silently to the curb at the foot of the steps, and Baldwin said, "Ah. Irene is just two minutes early."

Napoleon's eye traced the graceful bulk of the car as the three men hurried down the wide stone steps. Illya stepped ahead and opened the back door. Napoleon got in as Baldwin ignored the Russian and got into the right front seat. His leg buckled awkwardly as he did so, and he half-twisted into the seat, gripping the edge of the door. He took his left leg in both hands and dragged it in after him.

"Good evening, my love," he said, with a grimace. "My manually-operated leg is being uncommonly difficult."

"Good evening, Ward, gentlemen. Do you have everything? We may not be back for some time."

Illya nodded, and Napoleon said," I've got a change of socks in my coat pocket and a toothbrush in my inside pocket."

The motor had been ticking over all this time, but so silently that none of the passengers were aware of it until Irene fed it fuel and eased in the clutch. As smoothly and gently as a passenger train, with the same feel of power and mass, the great car crept away from the curb and gathered momentum. As it started around the corner at the end of the Quad something went TUNGGG! against a door.

"Are all your windows rolled up?" Irene asked at the back seat. "I'm afraid we're being shot at." The car accelerated and leaned left, away from the shot.

Napoleon had his UNCLE Special out, and his thumb automatically checking the tiny protruding pin just above the hammer that told him there was a round in the chamber. He snapped off the safety and felt the trigger spring forward.

"Mr. Solo," said Baldwin with some asperity, "do as you are told and leave the windows rolled up. As a member of the faculty of this University, I would prefer to have as few bullets flying about the campus as possible. The windows are capable of withstanding a .30 calibre machine gun shell at ten feet, and the body is a good deal more sturdy."

"It's a Mercedes-Benz," said Irene. "A 580-K." She swung the wheel easily as two more shots were faintly heard. "Originally owned by the Nazi General Staff. It guzzles gasoline terribly, but it *is* beautiful." The car wove from side to side of the deserted campus street, presenting the most difficult target as it sped towards the Main Street entrance.

A low-slung black car moved out from the entrance and muzzle-flashes flickered at its near windows as the body of the Mercedes vibrated and

rang. They swung left again, and a corner of the rear window starred with a sharp CRACK!

"Oh blast!" said Irene. "And I had it in perfect condition for the Concours d'Elegance next month."

"It's already been holed a few times," said Illya comfortingly.

"Holed? Good heavens! I hope not! Considering that they are probably not even using Magnum ammunition, I frankly doubt whether any damage will have been done that I can't repair with a paintbrush."

"Mr. Solo," Baldwin interrupted, drawing something from his wallet, "take this." Reaching diagonally across the back of the seat he handed a small plastic rectangle rather like a credit card to Napoleon, who looked from Baldwin to the card and back again. "Irene," said Baldwin, "take the next left, turn right into the first driveway, and pause for a moment."

"Certainly, dear."

"Mr. Solo, when we make the left turn you may roll down your window. Have that card ready, held as indicated on its face. When we stop, you will *immediately* thrust it into the metal box you will find within your reach. Do not drop the card, do not fumble when you insert it, and withdraw it the moment the buzzer stops."

They swung once more to the left, and through the radial cracks in the rear window Illya could see the black car full of blazing guns drawing up within a hundred feet...A buffet of chill air struck him as Solo's window went down, and then he lurched toward his partner as they swung right and Irene braked.

A buzzer sounded for less than a second as Napoleon performed his assignment to perfection, and Irene sent the Mercedes leaping ahead into the faculty parking lot.

Puzzled, Illya turned around to face the front seat, asking, "But how will..."

Something made a large bang behind them, then two more almost at the same moment. "You've missed it," said Napoleon, whose window was still down and whose head was out, looking backwards. "They ran up on those pavement prongs sticking up in the driveway, because they didn't have any authorization to use this lot, right?"

"Very good, Mr. Solo. Now pull your head in before a bullet or a tree removes it."

Illya gaped out the back window as they swung out the opposite gate. The black car, apparently with all four tires blown, sat just within the lot surrounded by men in identical black suits. Two of them seemed to be

waving their fists after the Mercedes as it picked up speed and vanished in the general direction of Interstate 89.

Section IV: "And With A Little Pin..."

Chapter 13: "It Seemed Like Such A Quiet Little Town."

Interstate 89 ended at Montpelier, the state capitol, and they picked up US 2 about eight o'clock. Shortly after nine Irene turned the Mercedes into a cheerful motel on the outskirts of St. Johnsbury.

"After we check in," she said, "we can look for dinner."

"Check in?" said Napoleon. "But we're on the run."

"Exactly. The people following us are reasonably clever. They will half-expect us to stay in hiding very close to Burlington, and half their forces will be searching an ever-widening area around the University. They will also half-expect us to concentrate on putting as much distance behind us as possible, knowing or suspecting the capabilities of my Mercedes, and will be searching for us another hundred miles ahead, over in Maine or further down in New Hampshire. We may run into these searchers tomorrow, but at least we will be able to face them well rested and, hopefully, fed."

"In other words," said Illya, "nobody will think of looking for us eighty miles away. It is neither too near nor too far, one might say."

"Precisely," said Baldwin. "Could we hold any further explanations of the obvious until after dinner? Thank you."

* * *

They stopped for a very late lunch in Rumford, Maine, after losing several hours on an interminable and mostly unpaved detour between Gorham and Bethel, crossing and recrossing the Androscoggin on crude wooden bridges uncountable times. The overcast sky had released a drizzle which developed to a soaking rain as they drove east across Maine, and it was already dark when they turned into Interstate 95 at Newport and rode the wide concrete into Bangor. They stopped for dinner there, and Baldwin disappeared to make a telephone call. He was back in two minutes, and resumed his seat.

"The storm seems to have been worse near the coast," he said. "Telephone lines are down, but it would appear to have blown itself out. The roads are open, and they assure me service will be restored before morning."

"Shall we go ahead?"

"I think so. If we arrive too late to disturb Roger, we can take local lodgings for the night and call on him in the morning."

After dinner they followed obscure signs through dingy streets until the town fell away behind them and the showers began to slacken. By the time they reached Ellsworth, an hour later, the sky began to crack and stars were

showing through the rifts, as bright and sharp as any seen from a mountaintop or desert.

They passed through Ellsworth and drove along the edge of the sea for another hour. They crossed bridges from time to time, and by the cold moonlight white spume flashed from the breakers dashing against the ragged rocks. The sky was clear now, swept of the last wadded clouds by a high-altitude wind. Small towns passed, dimly lit in the midst of the great starry night, and it was somewhere past eleven o'clock when the Mercedes pulled into a small parking lot with a single floodlight on a pole making a pool of yellow light in the silver darkness.

A sign-board swayed in the salt-sweet breeze over the door near the light. COLLINSPORT INN, *Estab, 1765*. Baldwin exchanged courtesies with the proprietor, apologized for the late arrival without reservations and requested two adjoining twins. The cold seeped in around weather-stripped windows, and wisps of it drove Napoleon and Illya under heavy blankets until well after dawn.

* * *

They woke violently, both already sitting up as awareness returned with the half-conscious memory of a thunderous explosion. Their still-ringing ears registered a grotesque hollow voice calling their names.

"*...ryakin! Solo and Kuryakin! Send Baldwin out here at once or I'll blow you off the map!*"

"I can't be sure about the voice behind that bull horn," Illya said, reaching for his trousers, "but I think he's Joe King."

Napoleon shook his head. "I'll bet he means every word. If he's got that Scrooch Gun working we may be in real trouble."

The wall below the window shook and flakes of plaster settled to the floor as another blast stunned their ears. Napoleon, whose clothing was neatly hung in the closet, reached for his shoulder holster on the nightstand.

Illya buckled his belt as Solo glanced around the corner of the window looking for their attacker. The great gray Mercedes in the lot caught his eye. "Illya," he said, "check the Baldwins. Tell them what's going on."

"Right." Illya rapped on the connecting door between the rooms. After a moment he knocked louder. "It's Illya. Open up. King's here and I think he wants to talk to you." He listened. "Dr. Fraser? Are you all right?"

He looked at Solo and raised his eyebrows. The American nodded. He tried the door and it opened. Cautiously he called again and stuck his head around the corner.

"*Send Baldwin out! I am perfectly capable of leveling the entire building if you force me.*"

The left window burst inward as a near concussion drove it in sparkling shards into the room. Solo hit the floor almost the same moment as the glass. As he rose, he said, perhaps a little sharply, "Well, where's Baldwin?"

Illya remained silent until his partner turned to look, then beckoned him wordlessly. Only when Napoleon was standing beside him staring into the empty room did he speak.

"Gone, I should imagine."

Solo stepped past him into the other room and ran his hand between the sheets on the rumpled beds. "They've been gone a while, too. Bed's cold."

Illya picked a folded piece of paper from the pillow of the other bed. "Ahha!" he said bitterly. "What have we here?"

"It looks like a note," offered his partner.

"I was afraid you'd say that." He unfolded it, scanned it, and then read aloud. "*The bogeys seem to have found us after all—I suspect a bug in the Mercedes. You boys will be able to defend yourselves better without having to worry about us old folks.* It's signed by Irene."

"Oh well," said Solo, "they left us the car."

"Bugged."

"Yeah, well..."

"*This is your last chance. Send Baldwin out or the minute...*"

"Oh, good gosh!" said Napoleon. "What'll we tell him?"

"How about the truth?"

"He'd never believe it."

"If it doesn't work it'll at least give us time to think of something better."

Napoleon nodded and turned back into their room. Illya padded barefoot after him. "Mind the glass," said Solo, safely shod, going over to the open window. He stuck his head out just a little and yelled, "KING!"

"*Thirty seconds, Solo.*"

"BALDWIN'S GONE!! OVER AN HOUR AGO!!"

"*You're lying. His car's still here. Twenty seconds.*"

Napoleon looked frantically at Illya, who was yanking his shoes on over bare feet. The Russian shrugged, and he turned back to the window, mentally estimating how long it would take to get out the door. "HE'S GONE!!" he yelled again.

"*Fifteen seconds.*"

"I don't think he's going to believe us," said Illya from the door of the closet as he swept his clothes into his arms. "Got any brilliant ideas?"

"*Ten seconds.*"

"I hoped you'd have one while I was keeping him busy. Shall we give up and evacuate?"

"Let's."

"*That's it, Solo. It'll be just as easy for me to dig him out of the rubble.*"

Illya dove through the door one length ahead of Napoleon, who dragged it shut behind him and hit the carpeted floor of the hall. The prickly fur slapped against his cheek as the concussion drove them together, and something caught him agonizingly across the ankles. Dust billowed around him as he caught his breath and choked. Stunned, he tried to raise himself on his elbows and found he was paralyzed. He tried to roll over, and then Illya was beside him. "Lie still," he ordered. "You've got a door on your legs."

"Oh, good," said Napoleon. "I thought it was something serious."

"You're lucky you don't have a pair of broken legs. Come on, see if you can stand."

With help, he got to his feet, but both his calves ached fiercely. "Yeah," he said doubtfully. "But I'm not going to be running a whole lot for a while."

"Can you walk?"

"Don't rush things. Just point me in the right direction and give me a push." He bent a knee and staggered a few steps towards the stairs.

"Come on. A little exercise will work those kinks out." Illya was fitting the telescopic sight and silencer to his UNCLE Special. "Did you ever get a fix on him from the window?"

"Dunno. Sounded like it was coming from that little clump of trees near the main road."

The lobby was deserted, and they dashed across the open space as another impact rocked the inn. As they flopped below window ledges Illya said, "I felt a flicker of anticipation just before that round. Did you hear anything?"

"Before the shock? I don't think so."

"Listen. If you twitch just before it hits, that's it." He rose to his knees and leveled the telescopic sight out the window. Steadied on the ledge, he swept its circular field across the edge of the grass to the grove which stood perhaps fifty yards away. He studied it slowly until he winced and the dull THUD! of another hit shook the ceiling.

"Yeah," said Napoleon. "I think I nearly heard something then."

"That was it."

Solo had his own Special clipped together by this time and was reclining on a window seat, studying the scenery through his own sight. After a moment, he said, "There y'are. Try your infrared filter just left of that big white tree."

Illya spun through four filters to a dark one, and a black shape outlined itself in camouflage against the height of living trees. "Got him." Holding the image carefully he dialed back to clear. Now his eye could pick out the details—a patch of shade resolved itself into a man, some sticks and shadows became a tripod and a great horrid thing on it...

"Wow," said Napoleon at that moment. "There's the Scrooch Gun. See it?"

Illya considered. "I've got four rounds of armor-piercing here," he said. "You have any?"

"Uh...two."

"That looks like a big battery pack right under the tripod. That is a tripod, isn't it?"

"Yeah...Oh, right. I see it." He sighed. "I only wish it didn't look so much like something out of a cheap science fiction movie."

"The large coils around the rear of the barrel generate the initial pulses; they taper towards the front because the pulses come faster and need less individual power. The fins are for cooling. The deeply curved stock would allow him to balance the thing to hand-fire if necessary. The lens above is probably a powerful and very accurate sight; the tripod allows him to use it to fullest advantage."

"I didn't say it wasn't reasonable," said Napoleon reasonably. "I only said I wished it didn't look so much like something out of a cheap science fiction movie."

"I know. So do I. Somehow, knowing how reasonable it is makes it worse." His ears sang lightly and the building shook. "That's about half a second warning, right?"

"Uh-huh. What's your target?"

"The gun. King's behind the tree."

He braced his arm and fired. The overcharged cartridge was deafening and had no visible effect. Illya flexed his fingers, set the elevation up a notch, and loaded another AP round. He centered the crosshairs just above the middle of the mess of coils which was pointed somewhere up and to the

right towards their room, let out half his breath and gently squeezed the trigger until the pistol thundered and leaped in his fist.

"You're low," said Solo.

Illya recentered the scope and saw the gun unharmed with a shattered wreck of steaming metal swinging beneath it.

"You got the battery pack dead center. Where were you aiming?"

"At the battery pack, of course. Mr. Waverly would want us to capture the gun whole, wouldn't he?"

Sirens faded up in the distance, wailing closer. "Unless he's got a spare pack charged up and ready to clip on, he's going to be in trouble now."

Illya nodded, and squinted as patches of light and shade shifted and withdrew beneath the trees. "There he goes now. Probably has a car just around the corner."

A police car squealed into the parking lot and three men in khaki leaped out. As Napoleon and Illya eased themselves erect, a sharp voice spoke from behind them. "You all right?"

The two UNCLE agents spun around to face a man in his shirtsleeves. "I'm the manager. Heard that fella outside, and saw you were better set up to defend than me. Phoned Sheriff Patterson—that'll be him at the door."

A voice of command on the porch shouted—"Holman—Crawford! Hit up those bushes and watch out. Hello in there!"

"He'll want to ask y'a few questions, but I'll speak for you." He glanced down. "Y' might want t' put your pants on before he comes in."

Napoleon looked down and remembered an armload of clothes dropped in the upstairs hall. Oh..."Thank you," he said, and fled.

With the police they checked the area around the tree and the tree itself for clues. A patch of leaves had been seared by acid and fragments of dull metal lay scattered some yards beyond. The tree itself was unmarked save for a worn but deeply graven legend, *Barnabas loves Josette*.

"Nothing," said Napoleon, as they started back to the Inn.

Illya shook his head in amazement. "And it looked like such a quiet little town."

Chapter 14: "It Was A Long Way To Go For A Pinhole."

It was past time for lunch when they found the tiny transmitting unit hidden in the chassis, and Illya examined it as they ate. "I was wondering," he said, "why Thrush didn't come down on us in St. Johnsbury if we were bugged. And now I know."

"Tell me, Mr. Tambo."

"I beg your pardon."

"Skip it. Why?"

"Because," said Illya, gesturing like a conjurer with the little magnetic module, "only King knew it was there, and only King had the right transmitter to *start* it sending. That was the ace up his sleeve and the reason he wanted to come up without a Thrush army."

"I'll bet he brings them next time," said Napoleon. "If only to find us."

"Not us," said Illya. "Baldwin." He took a bite of potato and ate it thoughtfully. "Speaking of which," he said indistinctly and swallowed, "how do *we* go about finding Baldwin?"

"He will have left us a clue of some kind," said Napoleon. "Or Irene will. They have enough faith in us to know we'd have faith in them. Besides, they'll want their car returned."

"Or Irene will," said Illya. "What kind of clue would they leave? Nothing too subtle, but nothing King could possibly have found if he'd gotten us and found the note, or even gotten us to tell him all we know."

"Uh-huh. Not painfully obvious, but something they'll expect us to find. I'll search their room, you search the car."

It was almost three in the afternoon when they returned to the lobby, mutually empty-handed, and were greeted by the manager. "Ah, will y'be wanting the rooms another night? Check-out time's three."

"Oh. Uh, no," said Napoleon. "Thanks. And, uh, you'll get in touch with our New York office for restitution."

"Since Sheriff Patterson says you're okay. Afternoon, gentlemen."

Following a few moments beneath the hood, Napoleon had the engine running without benefit of ignition key, and shortly, with Illya at the wheel, they were rolling back along the coastal road. "I can find our way back from Ellsworth," Illya said, "if we're going the right way for Ellsworth."

"Sun's in the west," said Napoleon. "Let me check the map."

He dug into the pocket on the inside of the door and drew out a blue leather folder. The Maine map was on top, folded wrong. He pulled it out and stared at it a minute.

"Well?" said Illya.

"This map's folded wrong," said Napoleon. "Baldwin wouldn't do a thing like that unless something was meant by it." He studied the exposed face carefully—the central section of the state, a wilderness of straggling lakes and lightly printed roads with more names of mountains than names of towns. He could see no markings and wondered about invisible ink.

"How about invisible ink?" asked Illya.

"It'd have to be more obvious than that," said Napoleon. "How would he know we'd have the right developer?" He unfolded the map and studied it from several angles. Then he stopped. "Ho!" he said. "There's a pinhole. Up there." He pointed. "Near East Pomfret."

"I'm driving," Illya said.

"Sorry. It's north of Milinocket, just below Mt. Katahdin."

"Would you mind hitting those again slowly? I have trouble with your Amerind names."

"It's maybe seventy miles north of Bangor. Up in the sticks. Biggest town for fifty miles won't break ten thousand."

"Seems an unlikely place for Baldwin to go."

"That's why it's so likely. There are no other marks on this map, if you want to try it; there are no other clues. I have four gasoline credit cards, and this upholstered tank is old enough to burn regular and like it."

"Irene won't," said Illya. "The engine is tuned for premium."

Solo sighed. "It goes on the expense account. Here's Ellsworth—watch for a sign. There: BANGOR 27, BAR HARBOR 20. I'll bet that was quite a game."

* * *

It was dusk as they rode north out of Bangor on Interstate 95, with small patchy clouds splattering the darkening western sky like muddy puppy-pawprints, and it was night when 95 ran out and they were delivered back to U.S. 2. They refueled in Lincoln about seven, and some time later Napoleon said, "State 157 takes off to the left pretty soon. We want it."

"Check." The sign was clear in their headlights, pointing them twenty-five miles to Milinocket.

In Milinocket Illya's arms were beginning to get tired, and he said so. "Bear up," Napoleon told him. "In twelve or fifteen miles we'll be at that pinhole. Look for a road that says...There. *East Pomfret, Ambajejus Lake*..."

"Ambi-what? Never mind. I hope you have the right pinhole."

"So do I," said Napoleon fervently.

East Pomfret boasted two street lights, one on either side of a narrow high-crowned blacktop euphemistically indicated on the map as an 'Other Highway'. The map did not indicate the solitary paved path out of town in the approximate direction of the pinhole, but Napoleon saw it in the edge of the headlight beam. "Turn there."

"If this truck will fit," said Illya. "My steering arms are about to fall off."

"We've come this far—it would seem a shame to quit now."

"If you're wrong, you can drive back. I'm willing to take the time to teach you not to use the clutch as if this were a 300-SL."

Napoleon squinted under the map light. "It looks like three miles on the map, but the road isn't shown and it might wind a lot. If we don't see anything in ten miles, we could dismount and try shouting."

Illya gave him a black look that was lost in the general darkness. "Five miles by the odometer."

"Aw, come on! Seven or eight at least."

The Russian slowed and swung left around the tiny darkened gas station, jockeying between it and the trees beyond the opening of the road. In his mind one thought was clear even above his professional pride in driving: *Irene will kill me if I scratch the paint*. Twenty yards ahead the road turned beneath interwoven branches and vanished from his headlights, but the car's flanks had cleared the corner. He sped up to twenty and flexed his fingers slightly. "Seven," he conceded.

It was just over four miles when Napoleon said, "Look."

Dim in the headlights on their left was a small signboard. It was the first work of man other than the road since an ancient bridge just outside of East Pomfret; that alone made it worth noticing. As they approached, Illya slowed and studied it.

Painted on the signboard and somewhat faded was the head of a stag, strangely done in gold with silver antlers.

"Bingo," said Napoleon.

"Congratulations," said Illya.

"That is a stag, or, antlered argent. The Fraser clan crest. We're home."

"How do you know so much?"

"A:" said Napoleon smugly, "my mother was a Campbell. B: It was in my file on Baldwin. C: 'Dr. Fraser' wore it on his blazer that evening we had dinner with Ed and Chandra. And D: look at that!"

They had stopped just short of the signboard, and now could see a pair of brick gateposts set several feet back from the road, half-hidden among

trees and high-piled bushes. The heavy metal gates, barely visible in the gloom, could be seen to be swinging open even before a concealed floodlight glowed and brightened the entrance.

"I think you were right all along, Napoleon," said Illya. "I beg your pardon for ever having doubted you."

"Thank you, Illya. And I will also admit that it was a hell of a long way to go for a lousy pinhole."

The gates swung closed behind them and the light went out. Ahead a well-tended dirt lane wound through patchy timber for another quarter mile or more before the porch light of a large building appeared ahead with an illuminated garage open adjoining it. They left the Mercedes there next to a two-year-old Lincoln and went around to the front door. Irene answered their ring.

An hour later they were all seated before a blazing fire in the great comfortable living room. Irene had kept two portions of dinner warm in hopes that they would arrive, though Ward had scoffed, and they had been gratefully devoured by the two hungry UNCLE agents. Baldwin passed liqueurs around, and now seemed willing to discuss their situation.

"So King was alone this morning. Unless he has another means of finding us, we should be safe here until the Council election is held. Though in desperation, King might enlist the aid of all available Thrush forces to find us; in that case our security anywhere would be problematical." He clipped the end from a slender cigar with unnecessary vigor. "A pestilence upon King and the fools that follow him! I have been hounded to the most desolate reaches of the planet by this blackguard, deprived of every civilized convenience, forced to live the desperate life of a hunted criminal..." He blew an aromatic cloud of smoke through the cigar and extended the brandy decanter to Solo, who declined.

"Wasn't your San Francisco house adequately defended?" asked Illya.

"Yes, but its neighbors were not. I should not have wanted to bring damage or destruction to the other five old homes around Alamo Square."

"So you closed it and left."

"Certainly not! I was forced to leave many valuable things behind, and given unlimited time King's vandals could have sacked the place. No—concealed within the building is a shaft, roughly six feet on a side, so well placed that only the most precise series of measurements could detect its existence. I had it lined with armor and spent some time ensuring the security of its entrance. Here everything concerned with my para-legal activities is stored. The building itself has, since my departure in June, served as the campaign headquarters for an incumbent state senator. Thus it

is constantly occupied by alert people, and the local police are particularly aware of any attempts at illegal entry or surveillance. Needless to say, none of them have the least idea of what they are guarding."

A buzzer forestalled the continuance of his remarks, and Irene slid back one panel of the end table to reveal a compact control board with a single yellow light flashing. She touched a switch and turned a knob, and the faint mutter of a motor, distinctly recognizable among the grotesquely amplified sounds of the woods and breeze, rose from concealed speakers. Illya rose as well.

"Do you mind if I watch?"

"Not at all. That's our easternmost sound detector on the road. I'd say the car is more than a mile away and proceeding slowly."

"You have the alarm rigged to trip on low frequencies only, right? So it ignores the background noise?"

"Very good. Yes, anything under 500 Hz continuing more than ten seconds at 0db." She tapped a button and part of the wall slid back to reveal a tastefully built-in television screen. "This is a commercial television set," she said, "equipped with ultrasonic reed remote controls." She touched another button several times and the set whirred. "Connected to an unused channel..." The screen brightened to an oddly luminous picture in what appeared to be diffuse low-angle sunlight: the front gate as viewed from across the road. "We have the output from a modified remote-controlled vidicon camera which has been fed through a three-stage image multiplier. The camera is controled by this cluster." She pointed. "These control tilt, pan, zoom and focus. The camera is set for the present level of moonlight, filtered through the trees."

Napoleon gaped as she touched one more button and the bushes piled high beside the gate swung gracefully and silently down, intermeshing and utterly concealing the entrance. "That," said Irene, "I put together from two garage door openers." She pushed a tiny lever left and the camera panned to look up the road. It seemed to be in a tree directly across from the gate and capable of at least 180° coverage.

It was nearly four minutes before the sound of the engine picked up on the middle microphone, and another minute before the car appeared on the screen. At an electronic command the camera zoomed in and the image of the car expanded. The dash lights supplied more than adequate illumination to show five grimly identical men scanning the roadside intently.

"Apparently King has called for help," said Baldwin bitterly, and fumbled for his pocket watch.

"Checking his time?" asked Solo.

"No—his wavelength," said Baldwin. He studied his large antique double-hunter turnip watch, flipped open the front face to check the time, then turned it over. "The original works have been replaced with an ultra-thin self-wound Patek-Phillipe movement. The remaining two-thirds contain my communicator. It was done especially to my specification." The second face flipped open to chrome steel and delicate knobs. He twisted the winding-stem and pulled up a fifteen-inch aerial, then scanned across several bands. "They have nothing to say at the moment."

The car crept past the camera, which panned to follow. Something moved in the interior and Irene zoomed in to catch the near man in the front seat lift something to his lips. Baldwin scanned again and a tiny voice spoke.

"*... ignboard to the left of the road with a deer's head in gold and silver —looks old. No place to turn off.*"

Irene zoomed back and followed them off right. Before they were gone another voice said, "*... there somewhere. Leave a beacon and we'll send a recon plane over in the morning.*"

"He was on another channel, the slyboots," Baldwin exclaimed sarcastically. "Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin, I understand you have had a trying day, but the evening is relatively young. The moon is setting, and you might do something to earn your keep for the duration of the siege."

"You want us to take out that car full of armed men and plant the transmitter twenty miles away, don't you?" said Napoleon.

"Your grasp of the situation is perfect. Mr. Kuryakin, your transceiver, if you please; I can follow your progress and guide you to the spot where, I believe, the car is now stopping."

The second west sound detector picked up the dying gurgle of an engine, followed by the ragged slamming of four doors. "If you leave at once you will have more than adequate time to find them; they are less than half a mile away—a mile along the road."

"We'll go through the woods," said Illya. "You don't really want that transmitter planted twenty miles away, do you?"

"Ten would probably suffice."

Napoleon rose reluctantly. "Do you think we could get through all that at night?"

"Don't worry, Napoleon. I was a Junior Woodchuck."

"I'm afraid all our sophisticated equipment is built in," said Irene.

"That's all right. We'll settle for a couple of old-fashioned flashlights."

* * *

"Where did you leave the car?" Baldwin asked them shortly before three o'clock the same morning.

"About fifty feet from the transmitter," said Illya.

"Which is on the far side of Debsconeag Lake," Napoleon added. "If Irene hadn't offered to pick us up we would've been home about dawn."

"I presume you neutralized the scouting party?"

"Effectively. We put them to sleep without a murmur, and packed everything they had in the car before we took it away."

"Including their trousers," said Illya.

"Oh!" said Irene. "They'll freeze!"

"Probably not," said Napoleon. "We piled them together so they'd be warm until they woke up. They'll still have to walk to East Pomfret—is there a telephone in East Pomfret?"

"There are five," said Baldwin. "I hope you remembered to turn on the beacon before you left it?"

"Of course, sir," said Illya. "May we go to bed now?"

"By all means. We may yet have work for you tomorrow."

Chapter 15: "I Think He Was Scrooched."

At nine-fifteen Ward Baldwin was seated in a sunny breakfast room listening to his pocket watch. It spoke tinnily of an airplane and a ground controller whose control did not extend to his voice, which grew harsher over a period of time.

"The men who were on the spot say there was no lake in sight. As soon as they have been picked up and treated for exposure they will be sent back. Look for the road."

"I can't see any road, I tell you! Everything is either trees or water or rock. There's just a few cottages and a lodge or two—and I can see the Appalachian Trail..."

"I don't want a travelogue. Find the car, why don't you?"

"I've got the beacon locked in...There's something...Yeah, I think that's the car down by the lake. I think the beacon is right near it."

"You've got the wrong car. You're at least ten miles west of where they called from last night. Fredericton and Bangor triangulated them."

Several seconds silence, then the same voice returned. *"And there wasn't any lake in sight."*

"Well, that's our beacon down there, boss. I don't know how it got there, but I'm going to set down on the lake and check out that car."

"Don't waste my time!"

"Field Autonomy, Paragraph Twelve. Baldwin couldn't get out of here without being spotted, so we're not in action at the present time. I'll take the responsibility."

Irene's voice spoke from behind him. "They certainly work well," she said. "Do you suppose they triangulate all communications as a matter of routine?"

"It would seem to be experimental in this area," Baldwin said. "A considered risk."

"Who are you considering risking?" asked Napoleon from the kitchen door.

"You're up early. Did you hear the radio?"

"Huh?"

"Last night's transmissions were triangulated," Baldwin said. "King is ordering a search plane into our immediate vicinity, and we will probably be spotted shortly."

"Will you have time for breakfast?" asked Irene.

"Oh, certainly. King is probably on his way to East Pomfret at the moment, and it will take him some time to get here and set up an attack. He certainly wouldn't want to miss again. In fact, he will probably insist upon dismissing all his support to face us alone."

"I certainly hope so," said Illya following his partner in. "Bacon crisp, eggs scrambled."

"Over easy," said Napoleon, joining Baldwin in the breakfast nook. "Have you considered evacuating?"

"Never seriously. The Lincoln is borrowed, and not remotely bulletproof; the Mercedes is nearly as visible from the air as this lodge, and is not so nearly well defended."

"Or as comfortable."

Breakfast ended before ten-thirty, and Baldwin re-checked all the silent channels of his pocket communicator. "I'm afraid Mr. King has realized we might be able to overhear him," he said, and restored it to his pocket. "Now we have nothing to do but watch the road and wait."

* * *

At precisely eleven forty-three both Napoleon and Illya twitched an instant before a dull explosion at the front door shook the lodge. Seconds later Baldwin's communicator chimed. He picked it out and extended the stem. "Good morning, Mr. King," he said. "You knocked?"

"*Just to let you know I was here, Baldwin. Do you want to give yourself up for trial by the Council, or will I have to come in there and get you?*"

"I refuse to dignify your insane railery with legal recognition. You will be given adequate opportunity to earn the position you desire, undeserved though it may be."

"*I'll deserve it for killing a traitor named Baldwin. And you may tell your Mr. Kuryakin that my power source is now multiply protected against another lucky shot.*"

"A traitor thrice accused is better than a traitor once proven, Mr. King," said Baldwin, and the front door thundered again.

Illya said, "Did you hear something just before it hit?"

"That's part of his oscillator circuitry," said Irene. "I believe it's a 50-millisecond burst at 14 kiloHz, which is beyond my range. By what I've been told, it can nearly be heard over a quarter of a mile away. It can also be nearly heard from just beside the gun."

"Very interesting," said Baldwin, closing his pocket watch. "What else do we know about the Particle Accelerator Rifle?"

"It's likely to come in the front door at any moment," Solo said. "You can ask its inventor."

"Come, Mr. Solo—we may indeed be unable to defeat it, but it would surely be the height of folly to concede the game without conclusively proving this. Mr. Kuryakin?"

"Were the sound detectors and all left on overnight?"

"Of course," said Irene.

"How did he sneak in here? Carrying that Scrooch Gun on his back?"

The sound detectors went off and the speakers came on. An engine was starting. "Sounds like a jeep," said Irene. The sound was coming from the middle channel. The motor revved down as the clutch was let in, and then faded, moving off. It didn't pick up on either side channel.

"Among many other possible methods, Mr. Kuryakin, he could have landed a large glider on Lake Milinocket and avoided the road entirely. Now about the PAR..."

* * *

It was not quite five minutes before Napoleon and Illya nearly heard something, and a window on the east end of the lodge was heard by all to blow in. Irene cocked an eyebrow. "The windows are made of the same glass as the windows in the Mercedes," she commented.

"He's going to keep that up indefinitely, isn't he?" said Illya.

"Unless we stop him," said Baldwin. "Mr. Kuryakin, you were just saying that the apparent cause of failure in the 1965 test was stray RF?"

"Right. It triggered what they called an *avalanche oscillation* and he was caught in it. Supposedly."

"Something started it going," said Napoleon. "A resonant frequency, right?"

"Uh, right..."

"Like the resonant sonic Thrush used on us when they attacked New York headquarters. If that had kept up we would have gone to pieces. You suppose we could..."

"... induce a resonant RF from here?" said Irene. "It's not impossible. We have a reasonably powerful transmitter here—and he *is* close by."

"All you have to do is find the right frequency, hoping he hasn't cured the Scrooch Gun of its need for extensive shielding, and lean on it till he blows up!"

"An adequate oversimplification of our intended procedure, Mr. Solo," said Baldwin, as the ceiling shook and their ears stung under the impact.

"We had best get to work on it directly. Irene?"

"It may be a long job, dear—I'll have to make some modifications before we can start."

"How can we help?" asked Illya.

"By staying out of the way," said Baldwin.

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other until another round slammed into the rear wall. "When I was in old-style wars," said the Russian, "the part I hated the worst was the shelling. I think it was the feeling of helplessness when all you could do was hang on and wait for it to stop. Do you know what I mean?"

"Perfectly," said the American. "Do you think we might be able to do something else this time?"

"If there's only one of him, maybe we could get to him. And Baldwin says there's only one."

"But he's got an awfully accurate Scrooch Gun all around the house. Now you tell me he can't get both of us between the door and the trees, and I'll let you go first."

"He can't see all four sides of the house at the same time unless he's in a balloon," said Illya. "All we have to do is figure out what side he can't see and go out that way. Dig?" He turned to Baldwin. "Irene checked me out on the TV remote units—may I?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Kuryakin. I have no objection to you doing your part."

Illya fired up the TV screen and switched to the camera monitoring the rear of the building. He extended the zoom to its greatest focal length and scanned slowly along the ridge, peering among the trees. Several seconds passed.

"Uh...nice gear," said Napoleon, conversationally.

"Thank you," said Irene, passing through from the workroom towards the kitchen. "I built most of it."

"You built it?" said Illya, not taking his eyes from the screen as she left the room.

The sound of rummaging came from the kitchen, and in a moment she returned, drawing on a pair of heavy rubber gloves. "Well, not the television set, of course, nor the cameras or their remote controls, but I wired everything together and built the image-multiplier from a kit."

"That's amazing," said Napoleon.

"Just a hobby, really—after all, Ward has his needlepoint..."

"There he is," said Illya suddenly. "Look! Up on the ridge!"

Among the trees they could discern a flat, narrow, jeep-like vehicle. Its profile and the disconcerting camber of its wheels identified it as the 'Mule' configuration. A man was standing on the rear section beside a heavily braced fat-barreled monstrosity with a glittering lens just above it.

"That looks like him," said Illya, and the rear of the lodge endorsed his opinion with a thunderclap. King quickly secured something and clambered into the single seat of the Mule; a few seconds later they wheeled away and out of sight to the left.

"Mobility," Napoleon quoted, "is the keynote of Thrush. Do we have another camera around to the side?"

"No—I can swing the front and rear cameras to catch him coming or going, but why bother? He's gone east; let's head out the west window."

"Ready any time you are, C.B."

"I shall close the window after you," said Baldwin. "Should you return, you will be able to ring the front doorbell."

They went out the window, across the open stretch of ground and into the trees, ears tensed for that almost inaudible cue to drop. They were under cover before they heard it again, and it was followed almost instantly by a splintering *crack* from the far side of the lodge.

"He's riding in rings around the house, firing as he goes," said Napoleon. "Primitive, but effective. He isn't doing much damage yet; shall we hide and wait for him to come to us?"

"Seems reasonable. Why don't we spread out. I'll signal if I see him coming."

They spread. The PAR mired once more for the east side of the building, and hit the front door area again less than ninety seconds later. The silence was perhaps the strangest part of the one-sided battle—except for the *slam* of a corner of the lodge being hit, the whisper of leaves and the calls of undisturbed birds could be clearly heard. The clear bright noon sun dappled through the leaves where Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin crouched in the chilly shade, and watched and listened.

King shifted across the front of the house at his leisure, loosing a round every thirty seconds or so. A beautiful scrollwork cornice exploded into a puff of white splinters, and another section of the steep shingled roof was blown clear of cover to the steel sheathing beneath, which rang like a tin can with the impact and cratered strangely.

Another minute passed as the two UNCLE agents hugged the clammy ground beneath their chosen bushes, watching the house fifty yards away and listening for the muffled engine.

Then a corner of the house burst into a brick cloud and fragments shattered and splattered the wide white door of the garage. A red hole gaped in the masonry as though a berserk airhammer had gone through, but as the larger shards pattered to the ground they heard King's Mule approaching.

Napoleon gathered his feet under him and got ready to move in any direction called for. The jeep engine raced and slowed, ground gears and came closer. It sounded as if it stopped fifty feet or so north of his hiding place, and he waited, squinting among leaves and trunks, for further evidence. Slowly he rose to a crouch and moved forward, ducking from his bush to a stout tree to an outcropping of rock.

On the other side of the rock a good twenty-five feet of open ground separated him from Joseph King. King was climbing from the seat of his Mule onto the rear deck where the Particle Accelerator Rifle was mounted onto a sturdy tripod, with guy wires and a chain. He started to aim the gun, which indeed fit into his arms like a huge clumsy rifle, his eye at the telescope and one hand falling naturally to a panel set with buttons.

As he did so, Napoleon charged directly over the rock, scraping on the face of the granite and sprinting towards the Mule. Even as he left his cover he saw King shift his weight, swinging the gun around like a pool cue, and wondered if he could make it. The twinge in his ears triggered his knees, and he skidded to his face in the wet grass as the rock behind him shattered into gravel.

He rolled desperately, leaped to his feet as he heard Illya's voice yell something from the other side of the clearing and dove behind a large stump. King swung the Rifle and fired again, into the trees where Illya had appeared and vanished. A small tree fell, a larger one cracked, and Illya flopped limply into view.

Solo recognized the cue. While King was checking to see if Illya was playing possum, he could sneak up on him. He rose from behind the stump —and leaped sideways as the PAR swung about to bear on him again. The stump blew to flinders and left a few roots protruding from the churned soil.

Where in hell was Illya? He should be on King's back by this time. Solo lay flat in the shadow of a dense bush and peeked between its tangled stems to where his partner lay, a lump of white against the bright leaves of October. But...he was *supposed* to be playing possum...

The tree next to him burst a few feet above the ground and showered him with splinters; the main trunk hurtled itself backward two feet and toppled dramatically forward, its leafy crown pointed accusingly at the Mule.

"You haven't got a chance, Solo," King yelled. "I got your partner and I'm going to blow you to a bloody mist before I take Baldwin back and feed

him to the Computer!"

Most of Solo's attention was occupied with an advanced-grade field manoeuver which involved crawling backwards rapidly without lifting his stomach from the ground; as a result he may have failed to appreciate King's threat. He rose to his elbows behind another tree sixty feet away and swore bitterly under his breath at the condition of his suit. He was lucky in one respect—that lovely telescopic sight was worse than useless against a fast-moving target at close range. He didn't let himself think about Illya, but looked cautiously around a tree.

King was shielded by another tree, but he seemed to be facing the area, watching closely. *This really has gone quite far enough*, Napoleon said to himself, and slipped his UNCLE Special from its comfortable shoulder rig. He intensely disliked shooting anyone from cover, but the circumstances would seem to dictate...

Running in a perfectly straight line, he kept the next tree precisely between himself and King. He put the edge of his face around the corner to see where his target was—and jumped back as half of the tree made a loud noise and ceased to exist between four and six feet from the ground. Then he jumped forward, another boulder as his goal. He dove ten feet away and rolled to a protected position before King could fire again, and found the automatic still in his fist. Even before he could grab a quick look around there was a deafening *CRACK!* and the rear half of the boulder toppled slowly forward.

Solo leaped to his feet, snapped the pistol into firing position and worked the trigger once before his thumb released the safety. In the instant before he fired, he was paralyzed by a head-splitting sound and an indescribable wave of tingling heat shot through him. The gun fell from his fingers and his knees trembled. Then his eyes focused on the Mule and he thought, *I'm not dead!*

King was still wrapped around the gun, but his legs no longer supported him. He slumped limply over the fat coiled breech, a faint stench and thin curls of steam rising silently from his clothes. As Solo stared, he began to slide, and where his face touched the metal it left a smeared black trail. The rear of the PAR was smoking slightly and part of the tubing seemed to be fused.

Something white moved across the clearing, and Illya staggered forward to lean on the side of the Mule as Napoleon approached from the opposite side. His coat was gone and there was a smear of blood down the right side of his face, but he seemed functional. He looked up at the seared ruin of what had been Joseph King, then looked back at Solo.

"I think," he said, "he was scrooched."

Chapter 16: "You Have But Mistook Me..."

A week and a day after the conclusion of certain disastrous events in the Maine woods, in the privacy of his own office deep within UNCLE headquarters, Alexander Waverly once again faced his two top agents.

"It was definitely King this time," he said.

"If that was King standing up there blowing holes in things," said Napoleon, "that's the body we brought back."

"The prints checked," said Illya. "The ones we lifted from the corpse are identical with the latest set you developed on King's forged record sheet. It really was him this time."

Waverly nodded. "Then we have succeeded in our mission. Section Eight is presently analyzing what's left of the advance model of the Particle Accelerator Rifle; the power supplies are already surrendering their secrets. And a great intellect which was lost to us four years ago has now been lost to our enemies as well."

"Leaving Baldwin effectively unopposed for his seat on the Thrush Council," said Illya.

"Yes," said Waverly. "That is that."

"I didn't really want to bring this up," said Napoleon, "especially now—but do you think we've done the best possible thing? I mean, King certainly would have been the most dangerous individual for the position, with his intimate knowledge of UNCLE, but Baldwin has got to run him a close second."

"At least he's not a fanatic," said Illya.

"True," said Waverly. "But he also knows far more about our patterns of action than King—far more than anyone should, for our personal security, if nothing else. There is a definite risk that in the long run Baldwin could prove far more dangerous to us. Still, we shall have another opportunity to assess the resolved situation when we meet with the Baldwins over dinner this evening."

* * *

The Masque Club, on East 54th Street, was a key club long before the Great Democrat Hugh Hefner made them public property. It assures its members of privacy by handing out black domino masks to every individual at the door and quietly insisting that they be worn in the common rooms. There the waitresses, also masked, may be distinguished by their relative lack of other costume.

A small percentage of the notorious and the merely famous are seen to enter and leave among the generally anonymous clientele, and many make use of the very private dining rooms which are available to members in good standing. A few people on the New York Board of Liquor Control know the real owners of the club, and a few people on Centre Street know that the waitresses are hired for many peculiar reasons beyond a good figure, but none of them has seen fit to comment on this. No one seems to notice if an anonymous customer should seem to stay inside for several days, though many do.

The private rooms fit the masque motif—the Harlequin, the Pierrot, the Fiammina, the Pantalon—and this night the Scaramouch was prepared for a very special party of seven. Five were there, two were expected. Irene Baldwin sat between her husband and Napoleon Solo, who, with Illya, bracketed Alexander Waverly as he faced Baldwin. Aperitifs were set neatly around the table, and Chandra's impending arrival with an unspecified friend would effectively curtail business conversation.

"I suppose you will be leaving us shortly," said Waverly.

"I must return to the University before Monday next, but we have a place here in Manhattan until then."

"You'll be concluding your business there, I take it."

"Oh, no. I have an obligation to the Physical Science department and to my own research work there. I shall be in Vermont the remainder of the semester."

"I hope we can see you again before you leave," said Illya.

"Oh, we'll be coming down to New York from time to time," said Irene. "It's not San Francisco, but it *is* convenient."

Waverly sipped his Cinzano and asked, "The entire semester? I had thought the Council election was imminent."

"In point of fact, it has already been held."

Napoleon spoke in surprise. "But...weren't you elected? With King's whole plot exposed?"

"Oh yes—I turned it down. It would have meant traveling about, living abroad...Certainly you never thought I coveted that position! San Francisco is my home; I have compared the rest of the world and found it wanting."

"What about the vacant seat, then?" asked Illya.

"It went to the nearly-unanimous second choice of the Council. A minor Balkan economist. You've never heard of him—but you will."

A discreet tap at the door announced Chandra Reynolds, who sparkled into the softly lit room followed by a lean dark man whom she introduced

as Lee Lang. He brought two chairs from the wall, and she seated herself on Ward's right, which put Lee next to Illya.

"Ward, you *must* tell me all about what happened in Maine! How did you ever find his weak spot? How did you even know he *had* one?"

"He was a monomaniac, my dear. Monomaniacs are incapable of taking adequate precautions."

"Really, Chandra," said Irene, "this is hardly the place to get him started on a story."

Napoleon picked up the cue. "Uh, where's Ed?"

"Oh, Ed couldn't make it. But Lee wanted to meet you—he knows *all* about you."

Illya glanced at him and could believe it. As Chandra held his partner's attention, he caught Solo's voice in a whisper and leaned back to catch it.

"It just goes to show, Mr. Kuryakin, only one thing is sure with Baldwin and his buddies—you *never* know where you stand."

The Russian nodded. "Absolutely, Mr. Solo."

"Positively, Mr. K."

THE END

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